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HERMENEUTICS OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Edited by

Felix Wilfred

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A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

Hermeneutics of Religious Traditions

Edited by

Felix Wilfred

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Editorial

Hermeneutics is a basic human issue. After all, any understanding is at once an interpretation. This very first number of *Jeevadhara* 1996 is an attempt to relate hermeneutics to religious traditions whose understanding is very complex for a variety of reasons: the very nature and forms of expression of religions themselves, their historical growth and evolution etc.

The hermeneutical endeavour relating to religious traditions today calls for a clear perspective, an option taken from a particular social location. Secondly, it raises important questions like who interprets, what is the purpose of interpretation and what is the process of interpretation. All the articles contained in this issue seem to respond to such questions — some explicitly, and others indirectly.

The article of Tom Michel surveys the problems and tensions encountered by the Islamic communities as they interpret their religious heritage in the context of modern socio political developments. The articles of K. C. Abraham, T. Murugathanam and R. Rocha highlight contemporary hermeneutical issues in Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively, and they do it with a clear bias in favour of the marginalized. The last mentioned three articles were originally presented at a national seminar organized by the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, during March 9 & 10, 1995, on the theme of "Re-interpretation of Religious Traditions in Contemporary India". These contributions have been re-worked for this particular issue of *Jeevadhara*. Due to lack of space, most of the copious references in these contributions had to be left out, and what we have are very limited and selected ones.

Amaladoss takes the hermeneutical question to a very important field of popular religious life — the experience of evil. Arul Raja deals with the hermeneutical process involved in the dalit reading of the Bible. Finally, my own contribution discusses the current

polarities in religious interpretations and advocates the need to move towards a subaltern hermeneutics.

The reader will notice how the various contributions, though written independently, have, nevertheless, a common thrust and direction. These contributions, I think, also have raised critical questions and have opened up new avenues in the hermeneutical enterprise. It is my hope that the materials offered in this issue will stimulate the readers' thoughts, and will also serve as a basis for common discussion and exchange on the issue among those who believe that religion, despite all its grave sins of omission and commission, could still contribute its mite, when re-interpreted, to create a more humane and just world and society.

Department of Christian Studies
University of Madras

Felix Wilfred

Crises and Tensions in Muslim Societies

In this article written exclusively for *Jeevadhara*, Tom Michel, a well-known scholar on Islam, involved in inter-religious dialogue in Asia, scans the horizons of Islamic religious universe. He highlights and comments upon some of the areas in which Muslim societies find themselves in a crisis-situation. In the second part of the article, the author presents thirteen tensions, or rather dilemmas, being faced by the Islamic tradition today. The article is an important contribution to hermeneutics in as much as it draws our attention to the problems arising in the self-interpretation of a religious community, when it is confronted by other traditions and forces. The author's presentation of the overall hermeneutical situation of Islam today will help us to understand better the dilemmas of the Indian Muslim community.

How does an article on crises and tensions in Muslim societies around the world fit into an issue dedicated to the hermeneutics of religious traditions in India? The relevance of this paper to the theme is due less to the fact that Islam is the second religion of India (and the second largest national Islamic community worldwide) than to the reality that the challenges facing Muslims in today's world do not differ greatly from those that confront all religious believers. Modern life has brought about rapid and dramatic changes in every part of the world, and the implications of these changes cannot be ignored by those who judge and act according to a transcendent ideal. For Muslims, this ideal is Islam, definitively proclaimed in the Qur'an and practiced in the life of the community. By seeking to interpret the tensions and crises facing Muslims today, all those committed to live according to their respective beliefs can find reflections of the struggles and choices facing their own faith communities.

As believers look to their faiths for guidance to respond to the challenges of modernity, they arrive at various and conflicting conclusions. Some welcome not only the technological achievements but also the philosophical underpinnings of a modern

outlook on life. They feel that modernity, while not without problems, is basically a liberating force for human life and society as well as for religious commitment. Others judge modernism, with its philosophical tenets of individual freedom, rational empiricism, and secular, pluralist concept of society to be incompatible with the principles of religious life and opposed to the values of human solidarity and harmony.

While the strains enkindled by modernity are found in all religious groups, my paper is limited to the followers of Islam. Muslim religious and political leaders, thinkers and activists are in active debate concerning the way the international Islamic community (*umma*) should face these crises and the role that Islam should play in the creation of a humane and godly world. In order to understand better both the problems of contemporary Muslims and the emergence of Islamic movements as attempts at resolving these problems, I will survey elements of crisis and tension in Muslim societies and review the proposals made by Muslims to bring about what they see to be needed changes.

A. Aspects of Muslim societies in crisis

1. Identity

In the Islamic world, there is a crisis of identity. How do Muslims define themselves and find their identity as members of human society? Where does a person's deepest commitment lie? Muslim leaders have offered very different answers to these questions.

a) *Ethnic unity*: Arab political leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdul-Nasser, Libya's Umar Ghaddafi, and the Ba'ath Parties of Syria and Iraq have proposed the ideal of pan-Arabism. Rediscovering pride in their Arab identity would be a source of strength and unity for Arabs still suffering from the divisions instituted by colonial powers. One can find parallels in the Turkism proposed by Kemal Ataturk and the Shah of Iran's restoration of the 3000-year-old Persian Empire.

b) *Social class*: Others have stressed class struggle and solidarity as the deepest identifying factor in modern political life. Most Muslim nations produced small communist parties on this platform, occasionally, as in the case of South Yemen, coming to power and governing. More frequently, socialism was held up as

a more egalitarian basis of a modern polity, as can be seen in the Ba'ath parties of Syria and Iraq and Algeria's National Liberation Front.

c) *Nation*: Elsewhere, nationalism offered a unifying identity to those emerging from colonial domination. This has taken various forms, such as the Egyptian nationalism of Presidents Sadat and Mubarak, Indonesia's Pancasila republic, the ideology of the governing United Malay National Organization of Malaysia, the modern democracies of Tunisia, Turkey, and Bosnia, the traditional kingdoms of Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, and the newly independent Central Asian republics.

d) *Religion*: Other movements locate modern Muslims' social and political identity in their participation in the Islamic community. Typical of this approach are the Jamaat-i-Islami parties of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, the opposition PAS in Malaysia. Algeria's Front Islamique du Salut, the National Islamic Front in the Sudan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the *mujahidin* movements in Afghanistan, and the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* of Egypt, Sudan, and other Arab countries.

2. Government

There is a crisis of legitimacy. How should Muslim states be organized and who should govern them? What is the process by which Muslims should obtain leaders? The crisis arises from the fact that Muslims today are but rarely governed by leaders chosen by the people. Many nations continue to be governed by hereditary kings, emirs, and sultans whose rule can often be traced back to collusion with one or another colonial power. Elsewhere, parties or individuals came to power through *coups d'état* in which the wishes of the people were not consulted. In some cases, populist, revolutionary movements governed too long in single-party systems (Algeria's National Liberation Front came into power with independence of 1962), and prevented the natural evolution of representative political structures.

The fact that many of these governments are ineffective and unpopular accentuates the crisis of legitimacy. Many leaders are accused of failing to provide effective development in terms of schools, health services, jobs, and economic progress. All too often regimes are marked by widespread corruption, favouritism,

and nepotism. Greed, ambition, and opportunities to enrich oneself and one's family are seen as primary political motivations, rather than a genuine commitment to serve the populace. Governments are commonly forced to employ repressive and coercive tactics, in the form of secret services, internal spies, manipulated elections, and harsh treatment of critics and opponents, to remain in power. The military, police, and internal security forces are seen as servants of the ruling clique.

3. Economy

The widespread lack of social justice is strongly felt by those who do not benefit from the actual situation. Wealth is poorly distributed, with a small number of extremely rich (Arab royal families, the new economic elite created by the international market economy), and many of the very poor, for whom civil services (education, job training, health care) are minimal. Many critics are convinced that economic woes are largely due to the economic neo-colonialism of the industrialized powers, and that national policies of economic liberalization and globalization serve mainly to enrich economic elites. There is a polarization between those who have and those who do not.

4. Military

The 1967 military defeat of the Arab coalition by Israel discredited both Nasser's pan-Arab ideology and the military establishments of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The 1991 Gulf War showed that even one of the Islamic world's strongest armies could not begin to oppose the technological mastery of the U. S. A. and other industrialized nations. A general feeling is that much of the national wealth has been poured into the military, with few positive results.

5. Cultural

The cultural crisis is seen everywhere in the Islamic world as new customs are replacing traditional behaviour. In matters of dress, music, sexual relations, eating and drinking, and items of mass consumption, Muslims are adopting ways of living that are perceived as coming from the West and in contradiction to Islamic teaching. Some believe that this is not merely a case of cultural imperialism, but part of a conscious effort to destroy Islam. Modern values deriving from the liberal philosophical tradition — individualism, human rights, individual freedom, secularism — which

accompany the material aspects of modernity, are promoted by government ministries in development programs, education, family planning, and women's causes. The political, economic and educational elites in Muslim countries are accused of adopting Western life styles and aping the West. Many Muslims ask whether the modern way of life is a step forward or backward for humankind and debate whether they should imitate the West or seek their own path in building modern nations. In this cultural conflict, Islamist movements find sympathy from ordinary parents who are worried about the direction their children and young people will take.

6. Legal

In most Muslim countries, the legal system is a relic of the colonial era. Law codes followed today are modifications of the systems introduced by colonial powers. Some Muslims ask why social order should be legally regulated by imported, man-made laws when the Islamic community has its own legal tradition revealed by God. Is it better to employ legal systems based on human concepts of law (Western positive law) or upon what has been handed down by God (the *shari'a*)?

B. Dialectic tensions underlying the appearance of political Muslim movements

Is there a need for change in society?

1. *Status quo* versus change

Muslim debates today revolve around the question of change. Are people satisfied with the ways things are, or not? Who is benefiting from the *status quo*? Who is suffering from it? If the conclusion is that few are benefiting at the expense of the many, what should be changed and how should change be effected? What should Muslims use as a criterion to judge, and who has the right to decide what action should be taken?

2. Populist Islam versus the establishment

In modern Muslim states, religious leaders (*ulama*, *muftis*) have become civil servants. Their education is prescribed and controlled by governments, as are appointments to positions of teaching and preaching. The content of Friday sermons is often fixed, and some governments have stipulated that sermon texts be

submitted for approval before being delivered. Those who depart from the theme or approved text can be suspended and, in some cases, imprisoned. Governments control funding, pay stipends, and decide which projects are to receive financial support. This allows governments to reward the manageable and to marginalize the troublesome.

The result is that, when the government is unpopular, the "official" Muslim leaders are discredited and seen to be tools, puppets, and allies of political powers. An unofficial, more critical leadership emerges that is free from and often opposed to government control. Populist charismatic leaders like the late Ayatollah Khomeini or Tunisia's exiled Rachid Ghannouchi, who are felt to be close to the people, become spokesmen for their concerns and assume key roles in calling for political change. These independent leaders are considered more honest, idealistic, "prophetic" in challenging institutionalized evils and defending the oppressed.

3. The political elite against those outside the centres of power (*ins* versus *outs*)

Who voices the criticisms of those outside the circles of political power? Between 1945 and 1980, secular intellectuals, often espousing socialist or communist ideologies, formed the main opposition. With the failure of international communism, this ceased to be an attractive alternative to the *status quo*. After the Iranian revolution, Islam came to be seen as a viable alternative that offered a divinely sanctioned, just, egalitarian form of government and, in many cases, the only well-organized, credible opposition with a clear program for change.

4. The economic elite versus the poor (*haves* versus *have nots*)

The disparity of wealth in Muslim countries is a cause of much dissatisfaction. The great wealth of the royal families (e. g., Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Emirates, Morocco) compared with the poverty of the people causes much unrest. The international market economy, regarded as a self-serving imposition of Western powers, has produced a small, new small elite of wealthy local business leaders, while the lot of the ordinary family gets more and more desperate. One of the first acts of the new government of Iran after 1979 was to ban Western brand-name products. At the time of the Gulf War, the widespread sympathy among

Muslims for Saddam Hussein was due largely to resentment against the excessive wealth of the Kuwaiti royal family.

Change to what? What direction should change take?

5. Historical development versus a return to roots

The formulation and practice of Islam has evolved over the centuries, with new generations of Muslims adding their own interpretation of Islam and practices derived from local custom. The question debated by Muslims is whether innovations are compatible with the spirit of Islam or, are they simply unwarranted distortions of the original teaching. Is there a need to reform the Islamic community by a return to its roots at the time of Muhammad? If so, what kind of return should it be? Many scholars stress the need for a reawakening of the original Qur'anic *élan*, the foundational religious impulse proposed by the Qur'an, which would admit of various kinds of historical development. Others propose a reconstruction of the societal structures, organizations, customs and political systems of the earliest community of Muslims. The Wahhabi movement, dating back to the 18th century yet still influential due to its alliance with the Saudi royal family, holds that all innovations are unwarranted. Muslims must return to the pure, unadulterated Islam preached and practiced by Muhammad and his companions.

6. Unchangeable or flexible understanding of *shari'a*

A related issue concerns the nature of the *shari'a*. Is it immutable or flexible? Is the *shari'a*—the Islamic way of life and legal system—a monolithic unity, the same everywhere and for all time, or does it permit local variations and historical development? In short, might some actions forbidden in the past be considered acceptable today, and might Muslims in a given culture or system of government act in one way, while Muslims elsewhere adopt other equally acceptable ways of following the *shari'a*? Until recent decades, the four main legal traditions of Sunni Islam and the Shi'i legal system had been basically unchanged, except for minor details, since medieval times. Many Muslims today urge a broad application of *ijtihad*, personal judgment, as a tool to live the *shari'a* creatively in the context of changing times and various places.

7. Modernism versus traditionalism

While most Muslims agree that some kind of renewal is necessary, they disagree regarding the nature of that renewal. Should the Islamic community be renewed with modern elements or should Muslims hold fast to traditional values? Muslims are aware that it is not simply a question of adopting modern technology. The most rigid conservative is ready to use computers, faxes, internet, and communication satellites to promote his views. The question is whether believers can pick and choose from the philosophical underpinnings of modernity or whether a modern outlook and way of life must be accepted or rejected in its entirety. Seen by critics as a comprehensive philosophy deriving from the thought of European scholars of the Enlightenment, modernism promotes specific values; secularism, individualism, materialism, societal pluralism, religious relativism. It is an anthropocentric (human-centered) ideology that withdraws religion from public life and confines it to the sphere of privately-held beliefs. For many Muslims, religious commitment presumes a theocentric (God-centered) society where God's will is the determining factor in social, economic, and political relations.

8. Pluralist versus Islamic society

Everywhere today, Muslims live in plural societies. Even in nations nearly 100% Muslim, there are divergences between Sunni and Shi'i, between "normative" and "popular" Islam, and between ethnic groups thrown together in competitive and mutually suspicious proximity. Moreover, one can find significant differences in outlook and values between convinced Muslims and those of casual, even nominal adherence. Many Muslim societies have indigenous non-Muslim minorities who demand full and equal citizenship, as well as migrant worker communities whose rights must be respected.

In modern plural societies, how can Muslims cooperate with non-Muslims to promote common values? A deeper question regards the most important values to be promoted and defended in society. Are they the common human values like social justice, liberty, defence of the poor and weak, and a life of dignity for all, which Muslims share with others, or are they explicitly Islamic values important to the Muslim community but not necessarily shared by others? Should Muslims

focus on the interests of the larger pluralist society, or specifically on those of the *umma* of believing, practicing Muslims?

The *shari'a* presumes societies composed of a united community of Muslims, together with designated protected non-Muslim minorities. In contrast to the Western concept of common territorial law binding all citizens and foreign residents, the *shari'a* is essentially a personal law, binding the individual believer. In the *de facto* pluralist nations of today, can the *shari'a* be applied as the law of the land? Would this violate the rights of minorities and those Muslims who do not wish to be governed according to the *shari'a*? What guarantees can be given to Muslim and non-Muslim minorities that their rights will be respected under the *shari'a*?

9. Secular versus godly society

Related to these issues is the question of secularism. Modern political philosophy tends to separate the religious domain from that of public life. Government, economy, and human relations exist and operate independently from religious structures and teaching. Although some modern nations have attempted to place severe restrictions on the public expression of religious belief, very few, such as communist Albania, have tried to wipe out religion entirely. More commonly, modern governments have taken a stance of "blindness" towards religious adherence and practice. What believers do in the privacy of their homes and churches, mosques etc. is their business, so long as it does not interfere with other sectors of society.

This policy, derived from Enlightenment political philosophy, has not been a complete success. Unguided by religious conviction, politics can become the pragmatic power game of Realpolitik and economics can become a jungle of greed and survival of the most aggressive. Many in modern secular societies suffer from a lack of direction, goals, and reason for living and resort to various forms of destructive and self-destructive activities such as drugs, gambling, drink, and promiscuity. The debate among Muslims revolves around the proper relationship that should exist between religious and political structures and institutions.

10. Nationalism versus unity of the *umma*

Before the colonial period, most Muslims lived in one of three large and powerful states: that of the Ottoman empire in Turkey, the Arab West Asia, and the Balkans; the Safavid in Iran; and the Mogul in the Indian subcontinent. Today the nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference number 57. Many consider the division of the Islamic world into relatively tiny and impotent nation states to be the result of efforts by their enemies to insure the geopolitical weakness of the Islamic world. They hold the concept of the nation state to be an un-Islamic, Western imposition and claim that the first allegiance of Muslims is to the *umma*. They criticize the military for supporting nationalist ideology and oppose the actual political leadership.

Most Muslim leaders today reject the concept of the primacy of the *umma* in political affairs and defend nationalism as a concept that provides unity and permits human development in religiously, ethnically, linguistically plural populations. The governing elites in Muslim nation states use the powerful means they have at their disposal — the educational system, state-controlled communications, financial power — to teach Muslims from an early age that as citizens of the nation state, their first allegiance is to their country. They must work to build and defend their nation. Muslim thinkers and activists critical of the state are considered disloyal and subversive, a danger to national security, and suppressed. All this results in conflicts between nationalist and Islamist movements. Examples are tensions between the nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization and the Islamist HAMAS, anti-nationalist movements in Iran under the Shah that led to the 1979 revolution, and revolutionary Islamic movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Algeria, and Tajikistan today.

11. Interior religion versus activist religion

What is the main thrust and scope of Islam? Does it primarily concern a person's relationship to God, obedience, reverential fear, prayer, and good deeds, as most Sufis and many traditional Muslims would hold? Or is Islam essentially a project for creating a godly society, one based in every aspect on the will of God? The question basically asks what

God expects of Muslims in this world. Should they aim their energies mainly at personal holiness or towards reforming society in accord with God's will? All Muslims would agree that both are important, but the tension is real in that it involves choices and priorities concerning the use of time, human and financial resources, and the direction of Muslim movements.

12. Political versus non-political religion

Closely related is the question of the relationship between religion and politics. Can Islam be fully lived in any political order, under any government, with any political leaders? Are Muslims obliged to influence, shape and determine the political system and seek to dominate political life? Some Muslim movements, such as the Tablighi Jamaat, hold that until Muslims truly live and practice an interiorized faith, it is pointless to speak of an Islamic state. What is essential is that Muslims repent and change their lives so that each Muslim becomes a practicing believer. When the time comes when all Muslims in a given nation fully live their faith, an Islamic state will have arrived. It cannot be artificially imposed by elections or revolution.

Others respond that Islam is a holistic, all-embracing way of life that knows no distinction between ritual worship, family affairs, economic matters, and political issues. Hence, Muslims cannot claim to be disinterested in politics, but must seek to create a political system that favors and encourages the integral practice of Islam. They state that working to create an Islamic state is a religious act, a form of worship of God, and inescapable obligation on every Muslim.

13. Reform or revolution

Most Muslims agree that some form of societal change is needed, and hold that political change is necessary. The question is how to go about it. Is developmental, evolutionary change a realistic possibility, or must existing structures be dismantled so that they can be replaced with more just, egalitarian, and human forms of political and social life? This is a resurfacing of the ancient debate between those who favour working within existing structures and those who seek to overthrow them.

Islamist movements favouring a democratic approach are committed to work within systems of party politics to bring about evolutionary change. Examples are the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Jordan, the Refah Party in Turkey, PAS in Malaysia, the Jamaat-i-Islami parties of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the MNLF in the Philippines. Other Muslims claim that the balance of power is weighted so strongly in favour of the status quo that there is no hope of bringing about needed radical changes in society and government except through revolution. In many cases, such as the absolute monarchies of the Arabian peninsula, there is no semblance of representative government. Elsewhere, they claim, democracy is a sham designed to perpetuate the power of the ruling classes. The only hope for change lies in revolution. This view is variously expressed by the leadership of the Islamic revolution in Iran, by members of the shadowy Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines, and by proscribed revolutionary movements in Egypt and Tunisia. Before the military coup d'état in Algeria, the Front Islamique du Salut claimed to be committed to democratic change but the present-day leadership has adopted an openly revolutionary position.

Bangkok

Tom Michel

Encountering Evil

Interpretations in Popular Religiosity

This article is a reflection on the phenomenon of evil as experienced and interpreted in people's religiosity. After describing some instances of how people respond to evil caused by other human beings ("evil eye"), by evil spirits etc., and how they try to ward it off, the author gives an interpretation of these experiences. Further, he contrasts the way evil is approached in the established and elitist religiosity, and highlights from an anthropological perspective the dynamics involved in popular religious approach. In this context, he makes some important comments on ritual, and power and control connected with it. The author concludes with some reflections on popular religiosity in the modern world, which includes also observations on the Charismatic Movement.

The problem of evil is one of those limit questions that provoke reflection in the field of religion. Suffering in its various forms are part of daily human experience. Everyone has to deal with physical suffering like sickness or accident, mental disorders of various kinds, natural disasters and losses or reverses in productive activities like agriculture, fishing or business. People who have such experiences ask themselves and others: *Why* does this happen? *Why* should this happen *to me*? *Why at this time*? *Why in this manner*? It is an unending quest for meaning. If one question is answered another follows. But actually people look for more than understanding. Much of religious practice at a popular level can be said to be an effort to ward off such suffering, to protect oneself from it, to seek a remedy when one is already afflicted. Popular religiosity is very much earthy, this worldly. Request for healing, protection or special favours in life are a large part of it. It is far from alienating one from life.

Faced with suffering or misfortune people are not satisfied with asking the question 'Why?' Since they want to get rid of it, they go on to ask the question: *How*? How does this happen?

Who is responsible? How can we get rid of this? The answer to these questions will enable them to look for appropriate remedies.

This way of encountering evil and of trying to overcome it constitutes a greater part of popular religiosity. Even the effort to secure divine help for the proper functioning of the agricultural cycle ensuring fertility or for success in other forms of productive labour like fishing, hunting etc. largely consists in protecting oneself from evil or malevolent forces that may seek to cause. This quest for causes and remedies is basically a quest for understanding leading to action. It involves interpretation of present experience in the light of a particular world view. The interpretation is not merely theoretical, but practical. This means that there is an in-built process of verifying if the interpretation is correct or not. Let us explore this a little further. Let us first of all evoke a certain number of phenomena and see how they are popularly interpreted. Then we could compare them with the interpretations of the more developed religions. After that I shall propose some reflections on how they can be interpreted in the modern world.

Popular Phenomena

A child or an adult is sick. Sickness could be physical or mental like depression. Generally sickness interferes with the normal life of a person. There is a crop failure or loss in business. At a first stage people look for natural causes and appropriate remedies. They may go to a doctor or other medical expert. They also know that loss or deprivation can bring mental suffering. People may blame the lack of rain or dishonest trading practice. But when such incidence of suffering is repetitive or prolonged, then the people see something abnormal and start looking for other causes.¹

One popular cause of sickness or minor misfortune is the *evil eye*. The 'evil eye' is caused basically by jealousy. When one is jealous of another's good fortune, that jealousy is seen as a negative force of disappointment with regard to oneself

1. I am making a summary from various sources. However see David Parkin (ed.) *The Anthropology of Evil* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1985) and the books mentioned in the other notes below.

and disapproval of the success of the other. Such a negative feeling is experienced as harmful to the other. One seeks to protect oneself from the 'evil eye', either by distracting the attention of the 'evil eye' by hanging one or other object or by invoking the blessing and protection of some favourite guardian deity or spirit. 'Evil eye' can sometimes be unconscious. Some people are prone to it even without knowing or wanting it. They may be people who are abnormal in some way, either physically or socially. They may have undergone a lot of suffering, so they have become like this and they may not be able to help it. The 'evil eye' points to a person who is a social misfit.

But there is another class of people who wish consciously to cause harm. They get the help of sorcerers, who in their turn, are considered to have control either over ritual processes or over evil spirits that can cause harm. Special symbolic objects may be mixed with food or buried in a house or a field and these foreign bodies, as long as they remain there, cause disruption in the normal course of events. Spirits may be deputed to take possession of some one and to bring on mental or physical disabilities. Such disabilities caused by a sorcerer can be countered or removed by another with similar or more powers. The interesting point here is the idea of *people* employing spirits to cause harm to other people.

People in secularized areas do not seem to believe in ghosts and spirits. But they seem to believe in the influence of natural forces like the stars. They believe too that they can protect themselves through charms. Here the agency of interference in human life has been secularized and impersonalized.

One could also evoke at this level the activity of the ritual specialists in coastal areas who claim to 'tie' the sharks in the sea from harming the men who go fishing. The sea itself is seen as a threatening force and is pacified with ritual and moral purity or with sacrifices. Elaborate precautions about not encountering certain type of women when going to the sea or penitential practices of the women on the shore to protect their men in the sea can also be mentioned in this context. The idea here seems to be the need for personal and social discipline

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when facing the forces of the sea, considered a cosmic/divine power.

People can also be possessed directly by the spirits. These spirits can be evil or good. People are particularly afraid of the spirits of people who have had unnatural or untimely deaths in the recent past. They are said to be wandering around, out to vent their dissatisfaction or wreak their vengeance on humanity. They haunt particular places or trees, especially when it is dark. One has to be careful. These spirits can be driven out by experts. The spirits who possess people in this way, if they have been sent by some one, often indicate the people who are responsible. This can be the occasion and cause of repentance and reconciliation at a social level.

In contemporary charismatic groups, people believe that they are possessed by evil spirits, who cause their physical or mental sickness. These spirits, however, are non-human. They are devils. Such possession is often seen as a consequence of sin. One can get rid of it by prayer and penance and by the help of the more powerful Holy Spirit.

People can also be possessed by Saints or gods/goddesses. This can happen in a personal or social context. In a personal context, this might point to some deficiency in moral behaviour or ritual duty on the part of the individual. Once revealed, this could then be made up. In a social context too the god or goddess can point to similar social deficiencies or to people in a family or social group like the village, who, by their acts of omission or commission, are responsible for upsetting the social order in some way. Repentance and reparation are then demanded and in a socio-religious situation like that, it will hardly be refused, given the strength of group-pressure.

With this kind of phenomena, we are already passing to a different register. We move beyond personal afflictions to social or natural disorder. It is also significant that people also move from minor spirits that can be commanded by humans to gods and goddesses who are beyond human control and act on their own. The divine is perceived, not only as the giver of all gifts, the source of life, health and good fortune. The divine power can also inflict harm either as punishment or as warning, seeking repentance and good behaviour. The human response in such a situation can

take various forms: ritual purity, moral behaviour, penance, propitiatory sacrifice etc.

An Interpretative Analysis

The first significant element in these phenomena of experience and interpretation is that people do not speak much about God. People certainly believe in God. But the 'high' God is felt to be pure, distant and transcendent. God does not get involved in the day-to-day affairs of people and in mundane history. This is left to a world of gods and goddesses, spirits and saints. Our encounter with the divine is therefore with a world-in-between, which is much closer to this world, constantly interacting with it.

People look at evil at various levels. At the lowest level, there is the natural universe of cause and effect. The people are quite familiar with basic scientific phenomena in so far as they affect their productive labour in the sea or on the land. But they are also aware that these causes and effects can be manipulated. At this level, they use charms or similar means of invoking the power of gods and saints to control such natural phenomena both positively for production and negatively for warding off destruction. I think one is at the level of popular science here. It is more than magic, because it is not something automatic. Nature is under personal control. Prayer supposes the involvement of some mysterious power. People will shop around for the more powerful agent to achieve their ends. Some saints or gods develop a reputation, for whatever reason. Phenomena are never seen as uncaused, even if they are not always under one's control.

Where one has to do with human, rather than natural, phenomena like physical or mental sickness, it is interesting to note that people always attribute it to a *human* agency, whether it is direct as in the 'evil eye' or indirect in the use of the spirits. Interpretation of these phenomena in the traditional way may lead to a confrontation with the evil-doer. Even if the confrontation is not direct for social reasons, there are indirect ways in which the suspicions are voiced and information goes around. This may lead to informal or unacknowledged social adjustment.

Even in the case of the spirits of the dead, a human agency is acknowledged, though a direct encounter is no longer possible. But the human aspect offers a plausible explanation and there are ways of coping with it.

The attitude to the gods/goddesses that normally, under God, interact with the world seems quite ambiguous.² They are not seen as embodiments of pure goodness. They have their terrific aspects. One would not call them evil, though they can cause harm and bring misfortune. But this action is never capricious. It is often seen either as a punishment or as a warning. Those who cause harm, can also offer a remedy. So people do not go elsewhere looking for remedies, but throw themselves at their mercy, pleading with them to 'change' their minds. The gods/goddesses appear sovereignly free. Where the god/goddess points, through possession, to a public disorder then there can also be a public remedy, with appropriate sanctions for the culprits.

Evil and the Religions

These phenomena are also interpreted and judged by people who belong to the elite pole in each religion. In Hinduism, suffering is seen as the fruit of one's past deeds. A basic causal link between sin and suffering is affirmed. Suffering is not merely seen as evil, but as punishment. One is unaware of the actual cause. All one can do is to endure. Given the fact that Karma is adequate to explain suffering, one does not need a principle of evil, either personal or impersonal, to account for it. Evil is in the freedom of people to sin and is the consequence of a universal law to which even gods are subject. Evil therefore can never be ultimate.

In Buddhism, the cause of evil is desire. Since there is no ego, there is no karma that attaches itself to a person, though one may be caught in its network. By giving up desire, one is not only escaping present and future karma; one is also freed from the network of past karma. There is no absolute evil principle either personal or impersonal. Suffering is the consequence of human desire.

Christianity seems more dualistic in its approach. It personifies evil in the Devil. Sin is not only the consequence of the freedom of the humans to transgress. It is also provoked

2. Cf. Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*. Cambridge, University Press, 1985. Also D. Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*. (Princeton, University Press, 1980).

by the temptations of the evil one. Sin also can have social and structural consequences. Suffering is experienced as the consequence of sin. But God is more powerful than the evil one and can liberate us from suffering. History is seen as a conflict between good and evil. The story of Jesus is full of exorcisms as a means of healing. His life and work are presented as a conflict with the evil one. But in contemporary Christian awareness the devil is more and more marginalized. The official liturgy limits itself to a discourse of sin and forgiveness. Liberation theologians stress the social and structural dimensions of sin. But side by side with the official liturgy, popular devotions seeking for favours are encouraged. With the charismatic movement, however, phenomena of healing and exorcism have re-entered the Church.

Anthropological Observations

Social Scientists who have been studying such phenomena point to many correlations between the social and the religious. I would like to mention a few of them.

The rise and fall of particular gods or rituals/devotions may relate to particular social conditions. Thus an anthropologist compares a community of fisher people whose livelihood depends on the Sea with modern dwellers in the city.³ The fisherfolk do not indulge in any elaborate private rituals. They know the risks of their job, which depends on nature and God and not on other people. But for city dwellers, working in factories and offices, in a situation where competition is fierce for scarce jobs and resources, the patronage and good will of others is very crucial. These people tend to seek the patronage of the gods and spirits who have a reputation of helping their devotees. They also attribute any failure or disappointment to human causes.

In seeking such patronage they seem to prefer gods who are close to human and earthly life. They are ambiguous in the sense that they are not pure and distant. They can do good; they can also do harm. In a world of competition one has also to ward off evil and one way of doing it is to be able to do counter-evil to those who seek to hurt us. One also feels that

3. Cf. R. L. Stirrat, *Power and Religiosity in a Post-colonial Setting. Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka*. (Cambridge, University Press, 1992).

such a god understands one's problems. Thus Obeyesekere describes the rise in popularity of such a god, Huniyan, who was originally seen as a demon.⁴ That seems to give them a special power to respond to the contemporary needs of the people.

Ritual whether social or religious, has to do with power and control. They are never seen merely as expressions of social life and situation. They are always seen as having an objectively sanctioned efficacy. One can see this in the *ex opere operato* principle. The clergy, of course, has this power in official religions. The rise of many popular cults on the margins of official religion may be one way in which the laity — i.e., the ordinary people — assert their right to have a direct access to the divine.⁵ At the same time it also points to the inadequacy of the ministrations of the official clergy, who seem to limit themselves to the supernatural sphere and cater to spiritual needs.

Psychologists studying the phenomena of healing in popular religious centres show how they are actually therapeutic programmes, but set out in symbolic form.⁶ For people at a popular level they may be even more effective and more integral than mere intellectual processes available in clinical therapeutic situations. One can decry the belief of the people in spirits etc. But one can wonder whether the language of the therapist is less symbolic than the language of the people and whether clinical therapy is more effective even at its own level than popular therapy. Many would agree that popular therapy is certainly much faster. A fisherman, when asked about the effectiveness of the blessings and other rituals that they use, said that he does not know how effective they are objectively. But they do strengthen his hope and trust. This is a psychological explanation which can be very meaningful.

4. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Cult of Huniyan: A New Religious Movement in Sri Lanka." in James A. Beckford (ed.). *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change*. London, Sage, 1986.

5. Cf. David Mosse, "The Politics of Religious Synthesis: Roman Catholicism and Hindu Village Society in Tamil Nadu, India." in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism / Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. (London, Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-107.

6. See Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors. A Psychological Enquiry into India and its Healing Tradition*. Delhi, Oxford University Press; 1982.

Popular religiosity in the Modern World

Popular religiosity is often accused of being an obstacle to progress. People are not less rational or less scientific in any practical way. But people have needs at a personal and social level. Some of these are manifested as sickness or possession. Popular religiosity has evolved a symbolic way of handling these situations. The alternative would be to flood the villages with psychiatrists and their couches. But even then one is not sure that they will bring holistic healing. The Church on its side insists on formalistic, 'spiritual' religion and ritual, without catering to the real needs of the people. Therefore we need not be too quick to criticize the holistic methods of the popular religiosity.

One problem that we have to face in any kind of re-interpretation of popular religiosity is their world-view. One may not like a world peopled with spirits. But the alternative need not be a secular, empiric, material world. I think that we have to take seriously the reality of a 'world-in-between', that transcends the merely material and individual. The human person is spirit-in-body. As such there may be inter-personal psychic and social forces that are not measurable. Some spiritual masters, for example, speak about vibrations reaching out to other people. If good vibrations reach out to other people to produce constructive effects of personal growth, bad vibrations can also reach people to cause harm even at an unconscious level. The unconscious and the sub-conscious find self-expression in the symbolic world of spirits. If people can be helped to the psychic and social nature of the causes of their sufferings and if there are appropriate forums in the community where people can openly speak about others who they think are harming them in some way and where social problems afflicting an individual or the community can be tackled in an open way, then the world of spirits will disappear. With such openness, possible abuses of the symbolic processes, where some one is easily accused of sorcery, may also disappear. I think that the charismatic movement by making people project their suffering on an evil spirit is hindering them from identifying its psychic and social causes and seeking a remedy at that level. This is alienating.

We must also encourage people — in the manner of Job — to experience God who is mystery and who can bring suffering without cause for God's own purposes. I think that people do

have this sense, when they are faced with suffering that is beyond the powers of any sorcerer or evil spirit.

I think that we also have to revise our image of God. The God of the Bible is not a God of pure transcendence. God is with us, involved in our lives. God can get angry at injustice. In Jesus we have a God who suffers and identifies with our own suffering. But we have made him an object of our sympathy and guilt. The Spirit is immanent and energizing. But we have hidden this God behind formalism and ritual. Ritual refers to mysteric realities rather than to life. A God who became human in Christ must be able to act humanly like him, identify with the poor, get angry at injustice, condemn the political and religious establishment, challenge formalism in religion etc. We need, in short, a *popular* God!

Delhi

M. Amaladoss

Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Reflections

In this article, the author draws our attention to the context in which a dalit reading of the Bible has come to the fore today. Following the conviction that the Scriptures invite us to act and transform, he shows how the impetus for liberation emerges from a committed dialogue between the dalit reader and the Bible with its semantic autonomy. As a result of such a hermeneutics in creative fidelity to the Scriptures, there emerges a new dalit text and a unique dalit language.

Background

The untold miseries of the marginated dalits¹ and their on-going struggle to become a people² from being reduced to and kept as a non-people by the notorious caste hierarchical system in Indian society and Church, have provoked the upsurge of dalit theology. This serious task of praxis-oriented theologizing, has manifested itself in several theological publications reflecting on dalit reality in recent years.³ In this process, the Word of God in a dialogical conversation with the struggling dalit consciousness has infused a fresh impetus to continue the dalit march towards liberation.

This brief write-up, while not claiming to be an exhaustive dalit(re-)reading of the Bible, modestly attempts to propose a few hermeneutical reflections on the same.

1. Method that 'Performs'

In biblical interpretation, the method, as the link between the reader and the text, plays a vital role in explicating the

1. N. D. Kamble, *Atrocities on Scheduled Castes in Post Independent India* (New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, 1986).

2. B. R. Joshi, *Untouchable: Voice of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, 1986).

3. X. Irudayaraj, *The Emerging Dalit Theology* (Madras: Madras Theologica Forum. 1987).

meaning. And in the dalit reading of the bible, the method, in order to be a relevant type of link, has to take into proper account the nature of both the dalits and the bible.

1.1. *Nature of the Dalits*

Of late, the violent confrontations between the dalit and the anti-dalit forces are on the increase. This is attributed to the growing dalit resistance to the caste hegemony and to the high-handedness of the caste-conscious elite. Though countered vehemently by the unjust measures of the oppressive elements, the just wrath of the dalits asserts itself in various ways in these days.

The wretched condition violently imposed on the dalits forces them to seek an immediate apocalyptic intervention from the unseen God. They need to experience the soothing touch of the affirming providence of the Divine. In this situation, numerous dalits are attracted towards the literal-fundamentalist evangelical groups. Their emotionally effective and electronically efficient measures are promising the dalits immediate solutions to their problems. The option of the dalits towards these "spiritual shops" though infusing into them a magical consciousness, is another mode of dalit protest against their prolonged subjugation.

This phenomenon of dalit assertion and protest is indicative of their 'dynamic restlessness' against the brahminical world-view with its in-built hegemony of the caste hierarchical system. The dalit consciousness with its in-built yearning for the total transformation seeks to subvert every structure that dehumanises them. The dalitness, no doubt, is bent on 'performing' a transformation.

1.2. *Nature of the Bible*

The Word of God is not a monument to be preserved; nor an idol to be worshipped. The biblical texts are the kerygma — the faith-proclamation — of our forefathers who perceived the hand of God operative through the ups and downs of their history. We are discovering that through the interpretation of the bible "the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation".⁴ In other words, the bible, by its very nature, is not primarily meant for dogmatic or pietistic or even moralistic interpretation, but essentially oriented towards 'performing' a transformation.

4. W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Towards a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 3.

1.3. 'Performative Axis'

The method of dalit reading of the bible has to be evolved in tune with the dalit action for transformation and of the biblical passion for transformation.

While modern biblical criticism was largely concerned with 'referential' axis (informative, i.e., saying), the post-modern criticism primarily concerns itself with 'performative' axis (pragmatic, i.e., doing).⁵ The dalit reading of the bible falls in line with the latter. Any method, that claims to facilitate a genuine dialogue between the 'performative' dalit consciousness and the 'performative' biblical text, has to be necessarily 'performative'. That is to say, it must be sensitive to the 'performative axis'. Such a method of the dalit reading of the bible is oriented towards concrete historical commitment transforming the present reality into a new liberative one. As a result of this 'performative' method, the liberation process of the dalits will gain a new momentum, ushering in a meaningful praxis-oriented dalit theologizing.⁶

2. Reader-oriented Approach (Dalit Reader)

The field of biblical interpretation has moved from the author-centred historico-critical methods to the text-centred literary critical methods, and now towards the reader-oriented hermeneutical (re)reading.⁷

The reader in the dalit reading is one who is an active and committed participant in the dalit struggle for liberation. The dalit reading of the bible, like any other contextual reading, does not indulge in the rhetorics of claiming value-neutrality, a-historical point of view, scientific objectivism, presuppositionless exegesis, a-political detachment and universal meaning.⁸ In the light of the

5. R. M. Fowler, "Post Modern Biblical Criticism", *Foundations and Facets Forum* 5/3 (1989) 13-14.

6. The outcome of this process is not going to be a mere academic type of dalit theology.

7. G. A. Yee, "The Author/Text/Reader and Power: Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies" in F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 109-110.

8. For instance E. S. Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation", *JBL* 107 (1988) 10-11.

typical dalit prejudices" (in the sense of Gadamer)⁹ along with their questions and concerns,¹⁰ biblical text is read and re-read. The meaning for dalit liberation is produced as the result of an involved intercourse between the openness (open-minded pre-understanding) of the dalit readers and the openness (semantic autonomy) of the bible.¹¹

3. Creative Fidelity

The approach of the "correspondence of terms"¹² between the contemporary dalit context and biblical world does not suffice in ensuring a lively give-and-take conversation between the dalits and the bible (e. g., dalits — Jesus, anti-dalits — Sadducees, Scribes, Pharisees and high Priests, Brahminism — Torah, neo-colonialism — Pilate, communalists — Barabbas). The operative presupposition here is that the bible is an historical account of what actually happened in the past. It runs the risk of entertaining the literal-fundamentalist reading.

Rather, one has to be aware of the fact that the bible is the product of the successive interpretations with creative fidelity to the foundational events (i. e., Exodus-event and Jesus-event). And the biblical kerygma is meant to awaken faith to be historically concretized through the acts of commitment of the community of the faithful. Now, our task of dalit reading is to re-effectuate the original, on-going and new impact of the liberative biblical events (that gave birth to the biblical texts) upon the contemporary context.

This approach is named as the "correspondence of relationship".¹³ Accordingly, we try to locate the dalit reading of the bible in continuity with the theologizing process in the past. This is illustrated as follows:

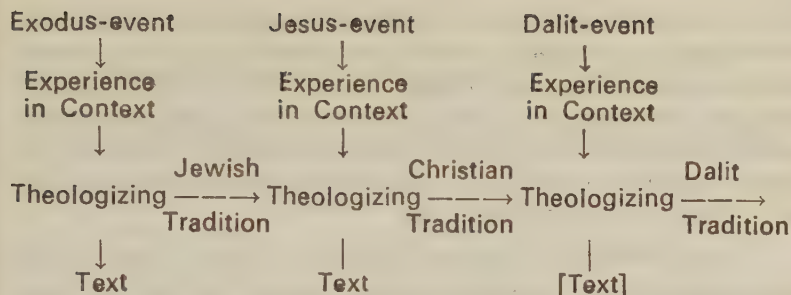
9. H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975) 295-305.

10. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial". Jeevadhara XXV/146 (1995) 104.

11. P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourses and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976) 29-37.

12. Cf. C. Rowland & M. Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Westminster: John Knox, 1989) 54-59.

13. Ibid., 59-65.



As indicated above, the dalit theologising should be done in the present context with creative fidelity and in continuity with the way the early Israelites / Christians theologized in their contexts. While discussing on the continuity with the past, we are alerted that a genuine pursuit of dalit liberation with historical consciousness and critical disposition cannot afford to sideline the valuable insights of the historico-critical and cultural-critical methods of reading the bible.¹⁴ This awareness will ensure that the dalit action is enhanced by the normative guidance and is in continuity with the foundational events of the bible.

4. New Dalit Text and Unique Dalit Language

While the dalits interpret the bible with creative fidelity, they themselves are interpreted by the Word of God. The people of the biblical world—the oppressed, the prophets, Jesus, Paul etc.,—in the early days, interpreted their context through the formation of the bible.¹⁵ The oppressed dalits of the present day, in continuity with biblical tradition, interpret the current context through the formation of ‘the new text’ indicated in the above illustration as [Text].¹⁶

When the open-minded pre-understanding of the dalit readers and the semantic autonomy of the bible are in dialectical conversation, certain specific features of the text, of the interpreter and of their respective contexts are high-lighted in all their socio-political, economic-cultural complexities.¹⁷ And hence the dalits

14. V. L. Wimbush, “Historical/Cultural Biblical Hermeneutics”, *Semeia* 47 (1989) 48.

15. For a brilliant discussion of this cf. C. Rowland & M. Corner (see no. 12 above) 59–69.

16. Cf. R. M. Fowler (see no. 5 above) 26.

17. *Ibid.* 24 (no. 3).

and especially the others need not be scandalized, when the Word of God speaks to the dalits in dalit 'language' often in terms of pollution — purity, shame — honour, holy slum — unholy temple, righteous disobedience — sinful obedience, resurrection in subversion — death in status quo, thunder of vulnerability — vacuum of power, demolition of the idols — barren worships, privilege of the ugly — dismissal of the chosen, etc.

The formation of 'the new dalit text' in continuity with the biblical text and God's communication through the 'unique dalit language' are inevitable realities in the dalit reading of the bible.

Conclusion

In the light of the above preliminary hermeneutical considerations with regard to the dalit reading of the bible, one can assess the importance of the relevant method, insofar as it helps us to 'perform' the dalit liberation. When the horizons of the dalit reader and the biblical world encounter each other in dialogical openness, we realize that the dalit liberation process is enhanced by the 'new' dalit text and the 'new' dalit language.

Arul Kadal,
Madras

A. Maria Arul Raja

Re-Interpretation of Christian Tradition in Contemporary India

Dr K. C. Abraham, a well-known theologian and president of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) gives us an overview of how Indian Christian community in recent decades has tried to re-interpret its faith, theology and its own identity by evolving new paradigms, which also meant a critical posture vis-a-vis those of the missionary era. He then dwells on some issues raised by this ferment of re-interpretation, such as context, hermeneutics, and particularly struggle for identity and community.

"A living theology is one that addresses itself to the questions, aspirations and sufferings of a people in a given situation."¹ This is true about the development of Christian theological thinking in India.

This article begins with a survey of the major interpretations of Christian faith in modern India. Three stages of development of thought are identified. Firstly, theological response to the challenges of Renascent Hinduism and Nationalism. The paradigm that emerged at this time may be described as *Christo-centric Universalism*. Secondly, the interpretation of the socio-political changes and secular ideologies from the perspective of Christian faith, making use of the concept of new humanism as a unifying theme. Thirdly, the emergence of the experience of the marginalised as subject of theological interpretation. After this brief survey we shall identify a few issues that are important for our continuing theological task in a multi-religious context.

Christo-Centrism: Responding to the Challenge of Hindu Faith

In the past, Indian Churches by and large a product of western missionaries were content with repeating without

1. Article on "Asia Theology" in *The Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 980, Geneva WCC, 1991

reflections, the confessions of faith evolved by the western churches in their cultural milieu. *Colonial protection and missionary paternalism*² kept the church away from the main stream of Indian political and cultural life. There was very little awareness by the Indian churches of the rich cultural and religious traditions around them. In fact, the missionary attitude towards Hinduism and other religions was often negative, their polemics were directed towards proving the superiority of Christianity over Indian religions. Some even conceived Christianity as the crown of Hinduism.³

The struggle for Independence and the emergence of a national consciousness together form a watershed moment in the life of the Church of India.

In the wake of nationalism, Indian theologians raised critical questions on the theological paradigm of the missionary era and embarked on a vigorous search for a new paradigm that embraced the religio-cultural experiences of people in India.

Concepts, doctrines and symbols of other religions, particularly Hinduism were used freely and critically by Indian theologians to interpret Christian faith. "Jesus as Avatar"; Trinity as *Sat*, *Cit*, *Ananda*, and spirit as *Sakti*—these are all attempts on Indian interpretations of Christian faith using the Hindu concepts. For some, the use of concepts and symbols of Hindu faith is not merely a heuristic device, but a way of entering deep into the living experience of faith and assimilating it. It even provided a corrective to their understanding of their own faith. They found the confessions inherited from the West to be inadequate for articulating their faith in the Indian context. It was indeed necessary for them to formulate it in new categories.

Chenchiah, a layman of impressive theological acumen proposed that:

By and through the birth of Jesus a New Power is released into cosmos, inaugurating a New Creation. "Viewed as an outburst or inrush into history, Jesus is the manifestation of a new creative effort of God, in which the cosmic energy of Sakti,

2. T. V. Philip, "Theological Priorities in India", unpublished article

3. J. N. Farquahar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1919)

is the Holy Spirit, the new creation in Christ, and the new life order the Kingdom of God."⁴

Influenced by discoveries of biological sciences and some aspects of Hindu tradition, Chenchiah has taken the vision of a cosmic unity as the most significant development of our times. Thus new creation in Christ, grounded on the fact of Incarnation, is interpreted in the context of this cosmic process.

It is striking that in this interpretation continuity between the faith experience of Hinduism and Christianity is affirmed. The distinct message of Christ for a Christian comes as a new apprehension of the already given. The polarity of faith is replaced by their complementarity.

Raimundo Panikkar, by far the foremost among contemporary theologians who have articulated and lived by this vision of complementarity, speaks of Christ as 'Cosmotheandric Principle' which is effective and acknowledged in the different religions of the world. He affirms Christ's centrality for Christian faith without excluding the reality of divine outside Jesus.

This process of interpretation can be described as a movement from an exclusive, imperial concept of faith to a more universal understanding of God who is present in all faiths. God experience is providing the bridge between different faiths.

The Search for a Secular Mediation

Socio-political changes and secular ideologies that interpret them raised formidable challenges to Christian faith. We see a new genre of theological interpretation arising out of theologians who responded to them.

George Soares Prabhu in his statement on Christology has pointed out the transition that is taking place today in the theological thinking when he writes:

"Any statement about God is always a statement about the world. An experience of God is therefore not so much an insight into the ontological structure of reality; it is an insight into the meaning of life; telling us what life is all about, offering us a guide for living, showing us the way (hodos, tao, marga)."⁵

4. *Rethinking Christianity*, D.M. Devasahayam (Ed.), Sundarasamam, '38, p.49

5. K. C. Abraham (Ed.), *Spirituality of Third World*, Orbis Books, New York 1994, p. 152.

A profound analysis of Indian revolution from the perspective of Christian gospel is provided by M. M. Thomas in a number of his writings. He affirms that the search for humanism is the driving force of all the political and social changes of our time. It is evident in the awareness of people of their historical vocation, in their new-found values of justice and freedom and in their struggle for a meaningful community.

Although these changes are the very stuff of the new context, Thomas is well aware that they are being vitiated and distorted by some of the inherent tendencies of the humans for evil. In fact, he is never tired of reminding us that evil is embedded in our corporate structures and we are enslaved by them. Thus, the context is fraught with creative as well as destructive forces. For this reason, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, judging and affirming Gospel, should be translated as critical discernment. The same framework is further extended to his discussion on inter-religious dialogue. Here Thomas has helped us to see the humanising character of nascent Hinduism and the possibility of entering into a dialogue with that strand of modern religious movement.

Thomas, thus proposes new humanism as a term of mediation. Secular in character, it is rooted in his religious tradition. In his interpretation we see a constant interaction between anthropology and theology. For him the starting point for theological reflection is the quest for humanism commonly shared by all religions and ideologies. Concomitant to this emphasis on a unifying vision of humanism we see the call for the church to participate in nation-building along with people of other faiths and ideologies

Liberational Praxis : a New Mediation

The Seventies and the Eighties have seen many changes in the national scene. The emergence of organised movement of dalits, tribals and other marginalised sectors and their determination to do theology drawing on their experience of oppression and hardship as well as their spirituality has become a new watershed point in Indian theology. It has posed a serious challenge to traditional paradigm, but more significantly it provides a new way of doing theology—a new paradigm.

In method and style it is similar to that which emerges from the Third World liberation theologies.

There are important differences among Third World liberation theologians, but they unite in their attempt to do theology from a particular experience of marginalisation. They emerge from a concrete context, but they articulate what they believe to be the core of Christian gospel. Their particular insights are offered to all people. In this sense, it is a paradigm-shift that they are proposing. Here we may direct our attention to two dimensions of this interpretation as they will influence further interpretation of Christian faith and other faiths in the context of present-day struggles of our people.

The Purpose and Direction of Theologising

The primary objective of theological reflection is to help people in their struggle for justice and freedom. It is not only to understand and interpret God's act, that is, to give reason for their faith, but also to help change their situation in accordance with the utopia or the vision of the gospel. In this sense, we affirm that the contextual theologies are liberative and critical. They raise critical awareness of people vis-à-vis their situation of bondage. They reject the dominant theologies that reflect the concerns of the elite. They provide a vision for the future, and empower people to change the existing values and relationships. They are integral to people's ongoing search for their identity and their struggle for justice.

To be able to do this theology, one has to make a 'preferential option for the poor'. A commitment, even a conversion to the victims, the oppressed and struggling poor should form the starting point, the basis, the heuristic for theologising.

In a multi-religious context this option will provide the necessary grounding and a direction that would integrate 'the mystical with the concrete prophetic concern'. In his response to Panikkar's proposal for a 'cosmic confidence' that sustains an inter-religious response and cooperation, Paul Knitter points out that 'it needs to be grounded and inspired by a preferential option for the suffering and the victims of this world'⁶.

6. Paul Knitter, "Cosmic Confidence or Preferential Option", in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, December 1991, p. 23.

Methodology : Liberative Praxis

Liberative praxis is the method of doing theology. Liberation theologians make a distinction between theory and practice on the one hand, and praxis on the other. The traditional pattern of theologising as in many other disciplines has been, first to enunciate a theory (as in Biblical Systematic theology) and then apply it (Practical theology, Ethics etc.). The assumption hidden in this procedure is that pure and true thought about reality can occur only when it is removed from act, and practice follows theory; doing is an extension of knowing. Praxis-thinking challenges this assumption of the Western Christianity, which is the hidden assumption of much of our educational system. It insists that what occurs apart from critical involvement ends up in construction of theories about existence that keeps us insulated from the real world. Praxis is thought emerging in deed; and deed evokes thought.

Praxis is critical reflection on historical as well as contemporary experience. Theological praxis as distinct from theory alone should take seriously all experiences in our church and our culture, critically examine them and reinterpret them if necessary. There are liberative, humanistic visions and values in the tribal dalit culture which have become long-forgotten. Or we are ashamed of them because of the influence of western rationality and Christianity that came to us through Western-oriented doctrines in our life-style and thinking. We need bold and imaginative recovery of these elements for a praxis theology that is the methodology we need to develop. Both these dimensions are present in the emerging dalit theology.

A. P. Nirmal, for example, proposes that dalit theology should emerge from the experience of "dalitness, their pathos and their protest against the caste and economic domination. He affirms that 'God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a dalit God'.⁷ Further he says that, against the background of caste oppression, 'the amazing claim of a Christian dalit theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the *Svayambhu* does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work himself. Servitude is innate

7. A. P. Nirmal 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology' in James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1995, p. 224.

in the God of dalits ... Since we the Indian dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege.'⁸ A similar reinterpretation is also articulated by women in India.⁹

The foregoing survey has raised some issues which are important for the reinterpretation of Christian faith in modern India:

(i) *The importance of context*

It is obvious that in any reformulation of faith the context and its challenges play a dominant role. Yet, our perception of the realities in our context vary. Even when we accept the perspective of the poor, we need to maintain a multiple view of their condition and the struggles. The poor are defined not exclusively in class terms, although economic exploitation is still the striking reality of the people. But the subaltern groups in India are subjected to other social and cultural oppression, and they seek a new world order. The spiritual resources for building it should emerge from their culture and spirituality. This has opened up new horizons of theology.

(ii) *The role of religion in a pluralistic situation should be clearly understood*

In this brief article, the main plea is that faith, religion, culture and other experiences of people should not be reduced to a scientific, technological framework, but an attempt should be made to discover their wholesome character expressed in the experiences of people. Such a holistic view is necessary if we take people more seriously. Too long have we been under the tutelage of western rationality and have remained insensitive to the liberative potential of religion and culture.

To dispel any misunderstanding, let it be categorically stated that the goal of our action is liberation, and therefore, in a situation of abject poverty and increasing disparities between the rich and the poor, our struggle should be primarily directed against economic injustice. The acid test of our faith, religiosity or spirituality is how we respond to poverty. The point, however, is that even in the struggle against economic injustice we need to harness the resources available to people in their culture and religion.

8. Ibid., p. 234.

9. See Aruna Gnanadason 'What do these women speak of?' in K. C. Abraham (ed) *New Horizons in Ecumenism*, Bangalore BTESSC, 1984, p. 89ff.

An EATWOT consultation on 'Religion and Liberation' states that all religions, Christianity included, are in various ways and to various degrees both oppressive and liberative. They are oppressive because they legitimise unjust social systems like apartheid, and caste, and because they created their own special forms of religious unfreedom. But history shows us that religions can be liberative too. They have inspired powerful movements of social protest (like Hebrew prophetism in monarchical Israel, or the bhakti movements in medieval India) which have attacked both the oppressive rigidity of the religious systems themselves, as well as the unjust socio-economic and political structures of the societies in which these religions flourished.¹⁰ It calls for the development of 'Liberative Ecumenism', that is, a form of inter-religious dialogue which is concerned not so much with doctrinal insights or spiritual experiences that different religions can offer to one another, as the contribution to human liberation that each can make.

(iii) *Hermeneutics*

One of the crucial issues is the reinterpretation of the scriptures, as they are the source and authority of a given faith-tradition. Here we face two concerns. One, there is a plurality of scriptures. How do we redefine the authority of one scripture distinct from that of another scripture?¹¹ Can we evolve an hermeneutical principle common to all? And this takes us to the second area of concern. The reinterpretation of the Bible by the marginal groups based on their 'experience of suffering and struggle'.¹² Dalit theology tries to 'discuss a paradigm within the Bible for dalit theology'.¹³ Nirmal finds that the Deuteronomic creed (Deut. 26:5-12) 'has paradigmatic value for our dalit theological context'.¹⁴

The marginal groups are conscious of the fact that the Bible was and is being used as a tool for class, race, gender oppression

10. Cfr. *Voices from the Third World*, Vol. XI, No. 1, p. 153.

11. See S. J. Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions*, Orbis, New York 1991, p. 86ff.

12. Aruna Gnanadasan, *What do these Women Speak of?* in K. C. Abraham (ed.), p. 96.

13. Dhyanchand Carr 'A Biblical Basis for Dalit Theology' in Massey: *Indigenous People: Dalits*, p. 235.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

of the large majorities of Third World peoples.¹⁵ Aruna Gnanadason points out 'while these liberative strands in the scriptures are upheld, we do not ignore those oppressive strands in the Bible that have contributed to the suppression of women and their dignity. Such a strand of our patriarchal faith heritage must be named and challenged.'¹⁶ A critical and liberative use of the scriptures is integral to the process of reinterpretation of different faith traditions.

(iv) *The struggle for identity and community*

Indian theology is challenged to take more seriously the struggle for identity by the marginalised/subaltern groups. For this they need a positive affirmation of the liberative elements of religion and culture. This will continue to be an important agenda for Indian theology.

Marginal groups like Dalits and tribals are seeking a new identity for themselves based on their past religion and cultures which had been suppressed or destroyed by dominant communities. In their struggle against historical as well as contemporary processes of domination, the Dalits and indigenous groups became conscious of their identity as people.

Speaking about dalit theology, Abraham Ayrookuzhiel says: 'the aim of dalit theology from a cultural point of view is to build up dalit identity. Identity of a people results from the dialectics between structural and cultural systems'. We should know that a correct perception of oneself and others, nature, society and divine power, a meaningful relationship with them and building up of one-self and of community at large is possible only in a social system of equality, freedom and solidarity.¹⁷

The Church in the past has been ambiguous in regard to its response to identity question. Christian mission for sure has enormously contributed to the social transformation of indigenous people. But it has been insensitive to people's struggle for cultural identity. The Church has often espoused a view of uniformity that suppresses all differences.

15. K. C. Abraham (ed.), *A Spirituality of the Third World*, p. 200.

16. Aruna Gnanadason, *What do these Women Speak of?*, in K. C. Abraham (ed.), p. 99.

17. Massey: *Indigenous People: Dalits*, p. 265.

We need to affirm that plurality is God's gift and diversity is in the very structure of God's creation. We are called upon to celebrate God's gift of plurality and diversity.

If the struggle for dalit and tribal identity is a demand to secure the rightful place of indigenous people in the wider human discourse and relationships, then it should be accepted as integral to God's purposes for them. The theological link between Christian faith and the struggle for identity should be strengthened.

The struggle for identity is also a struggle for justice and participation. This gives a concrete and distinct focus to our struggle. I believe that this focus on justice in our identity struggle gives us a concrete direction as well as new theological meaning to it.

A renewed community which allows space for different identities to flourish should be our common goal. We need to mobilise the humanistic and liberative vision of religions for building a just and participatory community. Fundamentalism is denial of the very essence of religion. At the same time to ignore the reality of religion in the lives of the poor is to ignore their basic struggle.

Commitment to peace and justice is the essence of religious faith. This is a conviction shared by many people of other faiths, not Christianity alone.

SATHRI
Bangalore

K. C. Abraham

Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics

Beyond the Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Traditions

The first part of the article reads the contemporary hermeneutical problematics through five polarities: theocentrism — anthropocentrism; universality — contextuality; ideals — praxis; tradition — change; transcendence — temporality. Expressing the inadequacy of the hermeneutical enterprise at work in terms of these polarities, the article underscores, in the second part, the necessity of moving towards a subaltern hermeneutics, and presents some perspectives on this issue.

One thing that is powerfully irrupting into the consciousness of the human community is the awareness that, in all that we perceive and understand, express and project, we ourselves are very much involved. This is true as much of the trivialities of daily life as of the most lofty creations human beings are capable of. That makes hermeneutics an all-pervasive and pivotal activity. In fact, there is no realm of human life and expression where hermeneutics is absent or does not play a very decisive role — no matter whether we are aware of it or not.¹

Every religious tradition is made up of certain beliefs, norms for right ethical conduct and rituals — all of which call for intense hermeneutical activity. It is required not merely to unveil the world of meaning behind sacred texts, symbols etc., so that we understand them rightly. There is a more serious reason: Interpretation has momentous practical consequences affecting the lives of individuals or of a group, or of the society at large.² Like legal texts whose interpretation can, for example, turn a person into a

1. No wonder then, that hermeneutics is of central importance to the humanities. What experiments are to natural or physical sciences, hermeneutics is to the human sciences. Or, to use another analogy, what grammar is to a language, hermeneutics is to the humanities.

2. Cfr. W. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics, Development and Significance*, Crossroad, New York 1991, p. 4.

culprit or acquit him or her, so too, the interpretation of religious texts, traditions and institutions has serious practical implications.³

The universe of religious traditions presents us an array of hermeneutical problems. In the first part of this article I limit myself to reflect on hermeneutics of religious traditions in terms of certain antinomies⁴ which we experience in the hermeneutical activity. If we observe closely the contemporary religious scenario, we will notice a five-fold polarity at work: (1) Theocentrism and anthropocentrism, (2) universality and contextuality, (3) Theory and life, (4) Tradition and change, and (5) Transcendence and temporality. Religious hermeneutics would vary very much according to the degree in which one swings from one pole to the other.

Ultimately we are called upon today to go beyond these polarities towards a subaltern hermeneutics. This is so, because the terms and issues of discussion involved in them do not seem to reflect the experiences and concerns at the bottom of the society, but seem to move at another level. "Subaltern" as per dictionary meaning refers to a situation "of inferior rank".⁵ Subaltern hermeneutics, then, is one that emerges from out of the lowly, inferiorly or marginally placed situation of any group in society. We can concretely think of different categories of people who find themselves at the lower and lowest strata of the society — the tribals, dalits, backward castes and classes, fishworkers, landless labourers and so on. The situation of forced marginalization and powerlessness of the subalterns⁶ is bound to have a radicality in

3. A typical example is the use of the text of Rom. 13:17 made by the "state theology" of the earlier apartheid regime of South Africa. It used this text — out of context, of course — to demand the Christians to conform to the existing political order, independent of any consideration whether it is racially a discriminative regime or not. The mere claim of being a civil authority called for, in the view of the "state theology", obedient response on the part of Christians. Cfr. *Challenge to the Church. A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa. The Kairos Document*, Delhi 1986 (Indian edition).

4. I am using "antinomy" in this article not strictly in the sense of two contradictory propositions, each one of which can be proved as in the case of the antinomies of speculative cosmology in the philosophy of Kant. I am using it rather to indicate strong conflict and polarity between two interpretative approaches which give birth to two conflicting types of praxis.

5. Cfr. *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, Delhi 1981.

6. I am using the word "subalterns" to refer to those who are found in the inferior and marginal situation in society.

religious interpretation which cannot be expected from the dominant hermeneutics. The second part of the article will be, then, devoted to some reflections on the necessity of moving towards such a subaltern hermeneutics today.

I. Hermeneutical Polarities

1. Theocentrism and Anthropocentrism

What is meant by this antinomy can, perhaps, best be illustrated with an example from the Christian tradition. In modern Christian tradition, particularly in Catholic theology, there came about a remarkable change when the Christian beliefs, practices, institutions etc., began to be interpreted with human person as the hermeneutical key. A typical representative of this orientation is the theologian Karl Rahner. His transcendental methodology is strongly anthropocentric. The meaningfulness of various Christian doctrines and practices are brought out by investigating the transcendental and a priori conditions inherent within human beings which enable their understanding of any particular truth of revelation.⁷

In other words, hermeneutics here is conceived as that enterprise which distils *meaning* out of doctrinal and symbolic realities of faith. Even more, any discourse about God and his manifestation is possible only with reference to human person. What is at the bottom of this hermeneutics is the reversal of theology and anthropology: Authentic anthropology is theology, and authentic theology is anthropology. Such a hermeneutics has quite far-reaching consequences when applied to Christian religious sources such as Scriptures and traditions.

The other pole of the spectrum is represented by Karl Barth, considered by far the greatest Protestant theologian of the century. He forcefully underscores the other pole — God — in the antinomy of theocentrism and anthropocentrism. His assertion that "God is totally the other", and his refusal to accept analogy of being, and his views on non-Christian religions amply testify not only to his theocentrism but as well to his particular brand of theocentrism. It means in effect that it is not we human beings who interpret the Scriptures — God's Word, but rather it is God's

7. Thus for example the various volumes of his *Theological Investigations*, specially, vol. IX, Darton & Longman, London—New York, 1972, pp. 28-45.

Word which interprets us. All that we are required to do is to submit ourselves to the Divine interpretation of our life and history.

As for classical Hindu tradition, we may not find such clearly marked antithetical positions. This is due to the difference in the basic world-view. However, the dialectics between theocentrism and anthropocentrism is not absent. If the unitary and wholistic vision of reality in which the Divine, the human and the nature are organically integrated, there is another aspect of the classical Hindu tradition which creates the environment for the antinomy of theocentrism and anthropocentrism. I mean the contrast between the really real (*paramartika*) and the relative and transient (*vyavaharika*). By associating the Divine with the pole of the real, and the relative and transient condition with the human experience of the world and time, the religious realities tend to be placed on the side of the Divine. This could result in the neglect of concrete human life and day-to-day experiences.⁸

In almost all the religious traditions there is the polarity of theocentrism and anthropocentrism not only in regard to the claims of revelation from above (sruti, Qur'an as God's Word etc.); but this polarity can also be found in regard to the normativity of human behaviour. The conflict is in interpreting the practical norms, laws and injunctions that govern the life of the followers of a religion.

By invoking that certain modes of behaviour and practices are part of the revelation from above, a stronger foundation for them is sought, which would not be the case if these laws, norms, etc., were of human making. A clear example is the discussion around *Shari'a* in the Islamic world in antithetical relation to more human and secularized vision of law. In Christian tradition too contemporary examples are not lacking in which a stronger foundation is sought for conclusively and definitively prescribing certain things and forbidding others by invoking divine right (*ius divinum*), in contradistinction to the mutable *ecclesiastical law*.

2. Universality and Contextuality

The way the universal and the particular, the general and the

8. I must immediately add that this neglect is not something peculiar to Hinduism, as often has been depicted specially in the context of Orientalism. In no less way, other religious traditions have fostered the neglect of the world, but on other bases and presuppositions.

contextual are inter-related constitutes another important issue in the hermeneutics of religious traditions today. The universalistic approach is one that enunciates, declares and defines what is true and applicable in terms of doctrines, laws and rituals, to all individuals, groups and people. This approach too employs hermeneutical tools. But these tools are mostly to confirm and ratify the doctrines, laws, rituals in their universal validity. Hermeneutics may be also employed in the process of applying these general and universal principles, norms, institutions, etc. But as we can see, here hermeneutics has no role as a basic and foundational activity for all understanding. Rather hermeneutics is being used; its instrumentality is availed of. In other words, hermeneutics is harnessed and domesticated for the purpose of what has been stated and declared as universal.

On the other hand, contextuality lays stress on what is particular, concrete and experiential. Hermeneutics plays a different and more basic role here. We could highlight at least two functions, corresponding to which we can have two different but inter-related understanding of contextuality: First of all there is the question of situating the various norms, doctrines, rituals, etc., in the contexts of their origin and evolution. This cannot but result in a certain relativizing of what are claimed as universal. In this process, one discovers that, what are projected and presented as universal are, in final analysis, what have been particular traditions, historically and geographically de-limited in their origins.

There is also a second sense in which contextuality as the other pole of universality acquires meaning. It relates to the present experience. The interpretation of the religious traditions, its sacred writings and other sources, is done from the particular historical context in which a person, a group or people find themselves presently. In this approach one reads one's religious sources such as the sacred writings from the present questions and issues being grappled with. The context then becomes the medium through which the text is read.

3. Ideals and Praxis

If there is one single issue which affects all religious traditions — without exception — it is the divide between the world of ideals and the world of actual praxis. Most of the time the theologians of the religious traditions function as artisans shaping

and moulding the world of ideals. The ordinary followers of the particular religious traditions and their official guardians are so enamoured by the loftiness of these ideals, that they fail to turn their eyes to the naked reality of daily life which challengingly stares at them. Therefore for any human problem, they have answers in terms of sacred texts, traditions, etc. There is often the firm conviction that there are solutions to all our contemporary intricate human problems, because there *should* be solutions in the sacred texts to all our questions.⁹ It cannot be otherwise.

Any a priori dogmatism based on the ideal profile of a religion harnesses the hermeneutical activity in service of maintaining its belief-system. Hermeneutics gets imprisoned within the fortress of hoary abstractions and theorizing. This state of affairs leads easily to a kind of self-deception.

Gail Omvedt, in a recent work very succinctly brought out in relation to Brahminism what is the perennial temptation of all religious traditions when they move in the realm of mere theory and ideals. She notes that the essence of Brahminism is to believe that *a problem is solved in reality, because it is solved in theory*.¹⁰ If that is Brahminism, we could say that much of it is present in every religious tradition today, and in Christian theology too. And there are many such "Brahmin" theologians in Islam, Sikhism and Christianity!

The hermeneutics imprisoned within the belief-system of a religion is unable to exercise a critical function. As a result what we often witness is a series of contradictions. Such are, for example, to state that "Brahmin" is not really a caste; it is a spiritual quality or a state of high virtues, and therefore, any one, irrespective of the caste he or she belongs to, could become a Brahmin. Such argumentations based on the ideal world is blatantly contradicted, for example, by a strongly stratified caste-society with centuries-old discriminations against the lower and

9. One cannot but be reminded of some Christian fundamentalist sects who do not fail to find in the Scriptures all the modern scientific and cosmological theories and of zealous Vedantins who find anticipated with so much of foreknowledge all modern scientific discoveries in the Vedas, including quantum physics!

10. Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions. The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, Orient Longman, Delhi 1995.

backward castes and, especially the outcastes. Another example would be the exaltation of "womanhood" and "motherhood" (hoary abstractions!) by the religions to the point of being romantic, while, in practice, denying them the basic rights and dignity as human beings. This is true of all religious traditions. Similar examples reveal how here hermeneutics is caught up within the realm of theory and is at its service. Such a hermeneutics has no reference to the other pole—the praxis.

In the antinomy of theory and praxis, the pole of praxis represents a challenge to the distance of theory from actual life-realities and experiences. A very telling example is the well-known standard argument against reservation to Christians of scheduled caste origin. It is argued that since Christianity does not believe in caste-system, there can be no claim for reservation. In this case we very clearly see how far removed from reality is such an argument based merely on the ideals a religion professes. There are innumerable other cases and instances (where it is not so evident, nevertheless equally true) which can illustrate how we move around within the world of principles, without caring to be confronted by the actual and concrete realities of life. This kind of theoretical self-enclosure is a shield, a mask and sometimes even a pretext to justify many unholy things. And that also explains the dynamics involved in the genesis of ideologies.

In recent times, in the Christian tradition, the various theologies of liberation have highlighted the central importance of praxis in Christian living and theologizing. Ultimately the shape of Christianity, for that matter of any religious body, is to be judged by what the Christians and the Christian community do. This is the most crucial element. What Christian message is and what its ideals are, are not difficult to see. Therefore, concentrating simply on the interpretation of this message while failing to reflect on praxis and its interpretation can create a world of self-deception and ideological stubbornness.

4. Tradition and Change

Many of the intra-religious problems and tensions today can be explained by this antinomy. The inner dynamics of a religious body is very much dependent upon how it views its own tradition and comes to terms with it. In a way, a religion can be looked at as a "cumulative tradition", namely a cluster of beliefs, normative

behaviour, rites, symbols, etc., handed down from generation to generation. This tradition, evidently keeps on growing like a snowball. One could distinguish many layers of this tradition as it grew through the centuries. At times, some of the traditions could be left behind, while others are retained. It very much depends on the religion. In Hinduism, for example, there is practically no tradition that is discarded; everything is retained and they have their survival, and that is how Hinduism is an amazing phenomenon with a plethora of traditions, schools, ways, practices etc.¹¹

From the hermeneutical perspective, tradition is a very crucial issue. This is connected with two important roles tradition plays in any religious group. The demarcation of the identity of a religious group, its boundary-building between the "we" and "they" depends very much on tradition. In some cases, it almost entirely determines the religious identity of a religious body. The other important role tradition plays is the enabling of communication within a religious community.¹² It means, in other words, members belonging to a particular religion are held together by a common net-work of communication, system of symbols, common codes etc., provided by the tradition.

Given such important roles, tradition, like theory and ideals divorced from praxis, could become the supplier of raw-materials for the ideological constructions. Religion backed by such a praxis-less theorizing and tradition, as I noted in relation to theory, can turn into instruments for control and domination. Such a control includes also the power to determine the identity of a religious group as well as to control and manipulate the system of symbols and the mode of communication within the religious community. Those who claim to possess the tradition of a religious body and its symbol-system become also its interpreters — the hermeneuts.

In view of the force tradition represents, it is understandable why change and innovation in every religion is met with resistance, particularly from those who reap the benefit of power and control through theorizing and by invoking tradition. In spite of

11. Julius Lipner, *Hindus. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Routledge, London 1994.

12. Cfr Robert Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies*, SCM Press, London 1985, p. 104.

it, when within a religion change takes place, a different kind of hermeneutics comes into play. We can observe at least three different dynamics: There could be a total *rejection* of tradition because of its ideological use for the purpose of control; secondly there could ensue a reform and renewal which is often based on a *re-interpretation* of its tradition and its sources as was the case for example with the phenomenon of Neo-Hinduism, or Vatican II. Change and innovation, finally, could come about by *external forces and stimuli*. But, very often what appears on the scene as new and challenging gets interpreted in terms of tradition and its resources.¹³

A very acute form of dialectics between tradition and change is observable when a religious group feels threatened by another religion or other social and political forces. Such a situation leads to another type of hermeneutical activity. The compulsion to safeguard one's religious identity occasions an interpretation of the present events in terms of what happened to the particular religious group in the past. Often what is involved is a re-interpretation and reconstruction of past history in terms of the present. This is what happened for example in the sensitive Ramjanmabhumi-Babri Masjid issue.¹⁴ Another example would be the Sikh reading of the contemporary events happening in their religious community in terms of their past history, specially their relationship with the Hindu community. It is interesting to note how in the hermeneutic perspective of Sikh militants, their masculine tradition of a religious community has been threatened by the "effeminate" Hindus. And they wonder how Gandhi with his non-violence and spinning wheel, resembling more a woman, could be the *father* of the nation!¹⁵

13. A classical example is the challenge represented by Buddhism to the Hindu tradition. Efforts were made to absorb Buddha and Buddhism within the Hindu fold, considering Buddha as an "avatar". This is not a matter of past history, but a matter of actuality. At the end of 1995, a common conference of Buddhism and Hinduism in Bangkok had to be called off, because of what was perceived as a subtle attempt to absorb Buddhism within the Hindu fold.

14. Cfr Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation, The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, Viking, Delhi 1991.

15. Cfr Veena Das, "Counter-Concepts and the Creation of Cultural Identity: Hindus in the Militant Sikh Discourse", in Vasudha Dalmia - Heinrich von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism. The Construction of Religious Tradition and National Identity*. Sage Publications, New Delhi 1995, p. 363.

5. Transcendence and Temporality

A fifth antinomy is between transcendence and temporality. The polarities between spirit and matter, body and soul, heaven and earth, etc., are but expressions of one and the same paradigm. In all the religious traditions we can note the struggle between these two poles, and the ensuing hermeneutical conflicts. This is such a powerful antinomy that we can observe it in the area of world-view, spirituality, worship, symbols, formulation of belief etc.

To cite an example from the realm of worship in Christian tradition, liturgy could be viewed as the earthly reflection of the glory and honour offered to God in heaven by angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim and so on — a view very strong in the Orthodox Christian tradition. It could be interpreted and performed as symbolic actions effecting real and integral transformation and liberation. In the same line, as an affirmation of the earthliness of our existence and the materiality of our body, celebration of life etc., one may introduce dances into the liturgical celebration. That would be to underline the earthly dimension of the sacramental action.

Whether hermeneutics swings to the pole of transcendence or temporality can be seen clearly in another important issue. The Kingdom of God — the central message of Jesus — could be interpreted as a transcendent reality above our concrete historical life and its vicissitudes. Or, it could be interpreted as something with deep historical roots and with eschatological movement towards fulfillment. These two interpretations cannot simply exist side by side in real life. In living out Christian message in a community of faith there is bound to be conflict of these two interpretations and the praxis, the liturgy, the theology each one of them inspires. Therefore Christians have to come to terms with these polarities of interpretation.

There is the general tendency among religions and religious agents to favour the transcendence as the realm of the spirit. In modern Christian theology one has tried to interpret anew transcendence in terms of future. In terms of space, transcendence is not something above but something below in horizontal position; it is the goal and direction of a linear movement. Some of the forms of modern Christian theologies inspired by secularization adopted this kind of interpretation of transcendence.

From another world of experience and concern, the various theologies of liberation have highlighted against too long a history of alienation from the world (*fuga mundi*), the central importance of the material and physical basis in the Christian faith-understanding. Even the sources of Christian faith — specially the Scriptures — have been interpreted from this perspective.¹⁶

As for the Hindu tradition, its history can be written through the optic of this antinomy. In fact, there are traditions which emphasize the earthliness, the materiality as much as the transcendence. From a philosophical perspective this is characterized by the contrast between *purusha* and *prakriti* — the spiritual and material principles. There seems to have been a continuous stream of thought in the Indic tradition which has the material principle, the *prakriti* as the key for the approach to and explanation of everything else.¹⁷

II. Some Perspectives on Subaltern Hermeneutics

The conflicts and tensions in these five polarities we have seen are also conflicts and tensions in the hermeneutical enterprise. Each of the poles operates with a particular hermeneutics, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not. My purpose in going through these five types of polarities is not to conclude that a hermeneutics based on the second poles be advocated, namely anthropocentrism, contextuality, praxis, change and temporality. I think today we need to go beyond the terms of discussion involved in these polarities¹⁸, and move towards a proper subaltern hermeneutics in the interpretation of religious traditions. I do not claim to be able even to sketch the outline for such subaltern hermeneutics. For the present, I want only to underscore the need of recognizing such a hermeneutics in the present scenario of religious interpretations, and make some brief reflections along these lines.

16. For example the work of Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, Orbis Books, New York 1981.

17. Cfr Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Atheism. A Marxist Analysis*, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1991; T. N. Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of the Tamil Siddhas*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research 1993.

18. These certainly have greater affinity to subaltern religious experience and hermeneutics. However, these affinities still remain within the parameters of a basically theoretical discourse.

Who is the Interpreter

A subaltern hermeneutical perspective on religious traditions should start with the fundamental question: who is the interpreter. The hermeneutical polarities we saw above do not really address this key-issue. The assumption behind them is that there are "experts" or those invested with authority who interpret religious texts, traditions, etc. for others. They may employ certain tools in this enterprise. Among such interpreters there could be differences of view, of orientation as for example, theocentric and tradition-based orientation or anthropocentric and change-oriented interpretations. Nevertheless, it is always some who interpret religious realities for the majority of others.

The subaltern hermeneutics, on the contrary, is one in which the question who interprets occupies the centre-stage. Many things depend on that. If hermeneutics is a critical function—as it ought to be in every religious tradition—then, this function becomes truly critical when the subalterns become the interpreters of religious traditions, its tenets, its history and so on.¹⁹ It is the first critical act in religious hermeneutics. By being the interpreters the subalterns will exercise in their own way another important hermeneutical role, namely ridding the religious realm of its ideological load. We have a typical example in the Dalit interpretation of traditional Hinduism, initiated by Jotiba Phule.²⁰ Their condition of being marginalized, disprivileged and discriminated against places them to be truly critical—a critique not deriving from the world of conceptualization, but from the actual life-world. Through their concrete experience of oppression and subjugation, there takes place, to use the expression of Jacques Derrida, a "de-construction" of the religious tradition. As we

19. This is true not only of religious traditions, but also of other areas. I may cite here an example from history. The presentation of the National Struggle for Independence is made in such a way that one tends to conclude that it is the achievement of a few heroes and leaders. But the fact is that there have been a continuous struggle of marginal peoples—the tribals, the peasants, workers etc., who through a sustained struggle and revolts, exercised pressure on the colonial regime leading to national independence. For a number of case studies, cfr Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies* vol. I-VI, Oxford University Press, 1982-1985.

20. Cfr Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, *op. cit.* pp. 17-24.

can see here the question goes far beyond theoretical discussions regarding anthropocentrism or theocentrism.²¹

A Different Religious Experience — a Different Hermeneutic

A second important question is the very understanding of religion itself. We know that there is such a lot of discussion about the definition of religion, about the Western character of the expression etc.²² My point here is not to contrast the difference between a Western approach to religion and other Asian traditions, for example. What I want to highlight here is the difference in the perception of religious reality — a difference that cuts across religious borders, and which derives from the *difference in social location*.

While for some — and they are mostly the elites — religion is identified primarily with the belief-system, code of conduct, world-view etc., for the subaltern groups, being religious is a matter of performing a series of rites and rituals, experiencing certain events, and intervening with some actions — all very much tied up with their life, its moments of joy, its situations of danger and threat. Besides, a fundamental difference in religious experience seems to derive from the world-view of the subalterns. In fact, we can discern among the subalterns certain commonality in perception of the reality and approach to it, etc., which makes us think of a shared world-view. A characteristic feature of this world-view is, to speak in images, not so much to seek explanation from heaven, but rather through earthly experiences, actions and performances interpret the "heavenly", the mysterious and sacred.²³ That leads me to the next reflection.

Subaltern Hermeneutics as Hermeneutics of Earthliness

The subaltern peoples and groups may belong externally

21. Of course, there is room to speak about anthropocentrism in subaltern hermeneutics. But the "anthropos" here is not abstractly defined "human being" without profile, but concrete and contextually located people with clear features.

22. One may refer the classical work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, on the origin and evolution of the concept religion, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, SPCK, London 1978.

23. It is seen also in their imaging of gods and their place in life. Cfr My forthcoming article on "Subaltern Religion: Between Continuity and Discontinuity".

to a particular religious tradition. But in fact their world-view very often does not tally with the religious traditions to which they appear to belong. Like a subterranean current, their religious experience follows its own course, unimpeded by the conventional demarcations of the various religious traditions above the ground. Their life and religiosity coalesce to form one single experience, which gets reflected in their hermeneutics. Their religiosity is made up of the very stuff and fibre with which life is made.

I must immediately add that this earthliness is different from the temporality to which I referred earlier speaking of the fifth antinomy (transcendence—materiality). This will be evident from the reflections below. While in the latter case, an alienating interpretation of transcendence may be contrasted with the affirmation of temporality, the world, the body etc.²⁴ as part of a discourse on world-view, earthliness in the religious experience of the subalterns indicates an immediacy and directness with which it is bound up with the material and physical realities and needs of real life.

Let me highlight the earthliness in the religious experience and interpretation of the subalterns from a different angle through an example drawn from the Christian community. It is common place to refer to certain segments of Christians—specially the lower castes and outcastes—as “rice Christians” “and wheat Christians”. The implication of this kind of appellation is that there are some people who became Christians for very noble and “spiritual” motives, whereas these people became Christians for the rice, the material benefits they received from the Church.

But if we look at the phenomenon through the eyes of the subalterns things look very different. People who have been denied bread, freedom, human dignity, turn to any direction from where they possibly hope to get these. Rice or wheat is something so very essential for life. The Japanese Christian thinker Masao Takenaka has a little book with a significant title: *God is Rice*.²⁵ The lowest strata of people in our society, the poorest of

24. One may think here of the theology of the world, theology of temporal realities etc. which emerged in the past decades as a counter-posture to the one-sided other-worldly and transcendentalist explanation of religious realities.

25. Masao Takenaka, *God is Rice. Asian Culture and Christian Faith*, The Risk Book Series, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1986.

the poor interpret religious realities with challenging earthliness. This has been so in the past as well as in the present times. Interestingly this has been a point of scandal and frustration for many missionaries in the past²⁶ and many others today who equate faith with its intellectual contents.

The seeds of a subaltern hermeneutics were present in the acts of the subaltern peoples in their quest for a religious affiliation which would respond to their needs for rice, wheat, security and other material necessities. Today this hermeneutics is unfolding itself with greater incisiveness and force. The growing critique by the subalterns of the religious traditions for denying equality of treatment, freedom and dignity is a further elaboration of their hermeneutics of religion through "rice" - a symbol of all that a human being requires to live and to live with dignity. This critical earthliness forces the religious traditions to find their true bearings in a politically, socially and culturally situated praxis.

Subaltern Hermeneutics as Oral and Performative Hermeneutics

What we have seen above, leads us to another aspect of the subaltern hermeneutics. The plethora of studies and reflections on hermeneutics being made today have the written "text" as their focus of attention and central preoccupation. All the intellectual energies and resources are invested on such objectives as unearthing the meaning hidden in the written text by decoding its symbol-system, letting the text speak for itself, studying the inter-relationship between the author and the production of the text, the text and the reader (actual and the implied), and so on.²⁷ In fact hermeneutics has become almost identical with the

26. We have an interesting example in the person of the famous missionary Abbe Dubois. Cfr his *Letters on the State of Christianity in India, In Which the Conversion of Hindoos is Considered as Impracticable*, 1823 (Asian Educational Services, New Delhi-Madras 1995).

27. Cfr K. Kunjunni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning*. The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras 1977; K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1993; P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning*, The Texas Christian University Press, Fort Worth 1976; Id., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985; E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1969; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics. Development and Significance*, Crossroad, New York 1991.

science of interpreting written texts. In Hindu tradition, for example, the beginnings of hermeneutics go back to contradictions that arose in interpreting the meaning of Vedic texts. Hermeneutics offered the guidelines as how to resolve these contradictions and arrive at the right meaning.²⁸ While the present-day intense hermeneutical enterprise has made some important contributions, at the same time, their obsession with written texts have also brought the life of the followers of the religious traditions, so to say, under the imperialism of written texts — revelational, doctrinal, legal, moral, liturgical etc.

Instead, what we find in the religious experience of the subalterns is the *primacy of the oral*, which is very evident in their mode of communication, interaction and transmission.²⁹ The oral character responds to the performance trait of their religious experience and expression.³⁰ The oral carries with it the feelings, emotions, moods, etc., which derive from the power of sound and the spoken word. Textuality tends to refine and restrain these realities and experiences.³¹ Besides, the oral tradition has a strong collective character, in as much as access to knowledge of religious realities is not through written texts and interpretations imposed on it from without, but rather through participation in the collective, communitarian performance. By performing in and with the community one comes to the knowledge of reality. There is a whole "theology of emotions" in the religious experience of the marginal peoples.

What has been said about the oral, performance and strongly emotional character of the religious experience of the subalterns only reinforces the need of a distinct subaltern hermeneutics, different from the textual one. Such a hermeneutics is implicit in the performative nature of the subaltern

28. Cfr Krishna Roy, Hermeneutics in Indian Philosophy, in *Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 290–302; cfr also K. Satchidananda Murty, *op. cit.*

29. For a deeper study on orality cfr Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologising of the Word*, Routledge, London, 1993 (5th edition).

30. Cfr Felix Wilfred, "The Challenge of Folklore to Indian Theologizing. Some Preliminary Reflections", in *Jeevadhara*, January 1994, pp. 60–80.

31. Cfr G. Patrick, *A Descriptive Study of the Dynamics of Oral Traditions with Special Reference to its Implications for Contextual Theological Hermeneutics* (A dissertation written under my guidance and submitted to the University of Madras for the award of the degree of M. Phil.). Madras, 1995.

experience itself. For performance is "a behaviour mode of organizing meaning"³² in immediate relationship to context and the life-world. It is in performance in a particular context that the communicative potential of the oral tradition manifests itself. Performance-in-context is the stage where oral tradition gets interpreted.³³

It would lead to a total misunderstanding if the oral tradition of the subalterns are subjected to a hermeneutical analysis in the way of a written text. For, in the subaltern tradition of orality and performance, more than what is said, the *saying* is important; more than what is said, the *how* it is said, is important.³⁴ Subaltern hermeneutics, therefore, is not something parallel to the textual hermeneutics centered on meaning. The logic and dynamics of performance as well as of subaltern hermeneutics are of a quite different nature. Therefore, there does not arise the question of laying down general principles of a subaltern hermeneutics. True to the strongly contextual character of the religious experience of the subalterns, there will be a wide variety of hermeneutics, depending upon the different situations and concrete performances. All that we can do is to discern certain common patterns, trends in the religious experience of the subalterns.

What has been said also indicates that the various rituals and symbols of the subalterns are not something to be decoded and interpreted in order to distil a world of meaning; rather, *these rituals and symbols themselves are interpretations of life, world, society, the divine all in one*. Therefore, the access to

32 Cfr Blackburn — A. K. Ramanujan, *Another Harmony. New Essays on the Folklore of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986.

33. What A. K. Ramanujan gives as an example in a slightly different context, may serve as an illustration of this point as well "It is dark under the lamp" is a proverb (oral tradition) found in Karnataka and in Kashmir. This very same statement has however two different meanings: In Karnataka it means "a virtuous man, like a lighted lamp, may have dark, shadowy places, hidden vices", whereas in Kashmir it has a political connotation, meaning even "a beneficent king may have evil henchmen". Cfr A. K. Ramanujan, *Folktales of India*, Viking, Delhi, 1993, p. xix.

34. Cfr A. K. Ramanujan, "The Relevance of South Asian Folklore", in Peter J. Claus, J. Handoo and D. P. Pattanayak (eds), *Indian Folklore II*, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, 1987, pp. 79–156.

them cannot simply be through the cognitive tools of the dominant contemporary hermeneutical traditions. It is by entering into these rituals and in the innumerable actions and interactions in daily life in which these rituals and symbols are enveloped that one experiences and participates in the subaltern hermeneutics. Here hermeneutics shifts from the cognitive realm as interpretation and meaning to an *interpreted experience of the world and society*. Hermeneutics is not a second moment, but something concomitant with life itself.

Conclusion

Today, the terms of hermeneutical discussions in religious field seem to move along the five polarities described above. We may find these polarities in varying degrees in the different religious traditions. We gain completely a different and radically new perspective when hermeneutics of religious traditions begins from the subaltern religious world and experience with the marginalized as the subjects of interpretation. We need to direct our attention to this subaltern hermeneutics today whose dynamics is very different from the one which revolves around the written text. Subaltern heremeneutics is not simply one more field of heremeneutical enterprise, nor is it simply a completion or corrective to the dominant hermeneutical project. It is a heremeneutics, so to say "from below". Naturally, this kind of subaltern hermeneutics will disconcert the conventional hermeneutics employed in the various religious traditions. What the consequences and challenges of subaltern hermeneutics could be is implicit in the reflections we have made. But explicating these would require a separate inquiry, and it goes beyond the scope of this article. What I have tried to do here is to simply highlight the need to move towards a subaltern hermeneutics.

Re-Interpretation of Hindu Traditions in Contemporary India

In this article Dr. T. Murugarathanam, Professor of Tamilology in Madurai-Kamaraj University, gives us an inside critical view of Hindu re-interpretation in contemporary India. He shows the discrepancy between modern ideals of equality, freedom, secularity, etc. and the hierarchical order of the society based on caste and birth. A new vision and perspective is opened up by some thinkers and poets in Tamilnadu (Tirumular, Tiruvalluvar, the Siddhas) and elsewhere, who underlined that human body is the temple of God and that it should be nourished. It opened up a new line of thought in the direction of world-affirmation, equality and social responsibility. These thinkers are to be viewed as guiding-lights in Hindu hermeneutics. The author also notes the challenges represented by Islam and Christianity for a fresh re-interpretation of Hinduism

1. Introduction

'Religion' refers more to the ideological/theoretical aspects, while 'religious tradition' has more a practical connotation. There are many kinds of traditions—religious traditions, socio-political traditions, economic traditions, artistic-literary traditions etc. The great religions can be understood only with reference to other forms of traditions. This article takes up some aspects of this question.

2. What is Hinduism?

The term 'Hinduism' was first used to denote the non-Islamic traditions of India, stretching east and south of the river Sindhu, i. e. Indus. Since India has been a multi-cultural and multi-lingual sub-continent, it is only natural that so many religious traditions were in practice. In the context of this pluralistic culture, Hinduism is described as a religion of religions or a collection of religions. Shankaracharya (8th cent. A. D.) talked about *Shan matha* meaning 'Six religions' under one religious umbrella, subsequently called what is known as Hinduism. The earlier stage is called Vedism or Brahmanism. It contains numerous

streams of thought along with a large body of rites and rituals, which were developed in parallel as well as in opposing lines in the course of the history of the Indian sub-continent. These are classified as Aryan/non-Aryan elements, Agamic/non-Agamic practices, great and little traditions, etc. Later reformist sects and movements also contributed to the pluralistic aspect of Hinduism. Any way, there are some common elements and aspects in the Agamic great religious traditions of India. They may be related to vedic-Brahmanic traditions. These traditions are taken up for study in this article leaving out the little non-Agamic traditions of the rustic common people.

3. Absence of Organization in Hinduism

There is no single authoritative centralized organization for Hindu religion, as the Church organization for the Christians. This situation looks very odd. There is a large body of religious literature; and yet, there is no single authoritative scripture or Holy book for Hinduism like the Bible for Christianity. The four Aryan Vedas are generally cited as the Holy Books of Hinduism. But they are not given to all; nor are they accepted by all. There are 'Naasthikas' under Hindu religion, i. e. those who do not believe in the Vedas.

There is no founder of Hinduism. But there are many saints. There is no canonization of saints and worship of them.

There is no clear-cut division of laity and clergy. The concept of membership of religion is absent, and there is no official common gathering or congregation of members. There are priests; but there is no proper training of priests. There are Maths (Matas), Sangas and Aadeenas; but they are all sectarian in function and character.

The absence of central authoritative organization has resulted in diverse interpretation of the religious tenets, and has paved the way for all kinds of cults and creeds to get under its umbrella. Thus Hinduism has become the conglomeration of religions, some of which have been opposing each other in ideology and practices.

Then what ensures the so-called Hinduism as a religion? Caste is the Unique feature, that ensures it, along with its social Dharma.

4. Varnaashrama-cum-Caste Organization and its effects

The most vital aspect of the Hindu religion is its structuring of the society. This is done by the institution of the Varnaashrama, the modern form of which is the caste system. In fact the four-fold Varna system of ancient India evolved into the present caste system. This socio-religious organization functions in the place of Church in Hinduism. The caste system not only controls and regulates the society, i.e. social groups, but also prescribes rules, rites and rituals and regulates the religious activities of the people. The chief characteristics of this all embracing caste system are listed here.

a) *Status by Birth*

Caste system determines the status of people on the basis of birth, which is very much strange and scientifically untenable.

b) *Hierarchy of People*

There exists a hierarchy of castes, i.e. upper castes, lower castes, out-castes, etc. This amounts to a negation of human values and the unity of humankind. It is against the much valued modern concepts of equality and fraternity, i.e., the democratic values.

c) *Concept of Pollution*

The core of the Caste system is the misconceived notion of purity — pollution; touchability — untouchability. These are believed to be bodily existing in human beings.

d) *Marriages outside the castes are strictly prohibited in order to preserve the purity and privileges of the upper castes.*

e) *Closed Religion*

Because Hinduism is based on caste which is determined by birth there cannot be any propagation and expansion of Hindu religion like Christianity and Islam. In this sense, Hinduism is a closed religion.

The ultimate goal of the human being according to Hinduism is release from the worldly bondage and the merging with the universal soul, i.e. *Paramatman*. It is the attainment of the Almighty which is ever-lasting bliss. There are means for

achieving this goal. The first step is *Karma*, the second step is *Dharma* and the third step is *moksha*. Doing good Karma, earning good Karma pala, going through the Varnaashrama Dharma namely, the Aashramas of Brahmacharya, Grhastha, Vaanaprastha and Sanyaasa and getting freed are the means and paths to reach the Almighty. But curiously the right to the Aashrama of Sanyaasa is only for the Brahmins and without undergoing Sanyaasa Aashrama, Moksha cannot be achieved. This ultimately amounts to the denial of Moksha to the large mass of non-Brahmins as well as to women. This means the absence of equality, fraternity and liberty which are the cardinal principles of Democracy.

The reputed south Indian historian Prof. N. Subrahmanian succinctly explains this point in his characteristic way. "It is no longer seriously doubted by responsible scholars that Hindu society is traditional, pluralist, and status-oriented and endowed with an ancient arrangement which has stood the test of time; it is also recognized that the basic ideals of that society are incompatible with the western ideals of, e.g. dignity and freedom of the individual, social and legal equality of all the subjects, and humanism. It is easy to see that castes which were snob groups in the society which had not evolved from the status to contract were the anti-thesis of egalitarianism, and represented ideals opposed to the cherished goals of liberal democracy. These were the ideals on which Hinduism as a social complex was carefully, elaborately and deliberately built and justified in the Dharma Sastras like Manu's."¹

In the history of India, challenges to this gross inequality were many. The Buddha was the first. He opened his religion to all, including women. In South India, the challenge came from Bhaktas, the Sivite Naayanmaars, the siddhas, St. Maanicka-vaachakar, the Vaishnava Aalwaars, Sri Ramanuja, Ramalinga Swamigal—all of Tamil Nadu—and Sri Basaveswara of Karnataka. Kabir Dass, Raja Rammohan Roy, Dhayananda Saraswathi from the North emerged from Hinduism and advocated the abolition of the Caste system. Modern challenges are coming from Islam and Christianity. A pertinent point made by the modern sociologist Yogendra Singh may be quoted here: "While a large

1. N. Subrahmanian in "Hinduism at the Cross Roads" in *The Hindu Tripod*, Kudal publishers. Madurai, (1976), p. 169-170.

segment of the devotional school was an effort to popularise and reiterate the selected values of the Hindu Great tradition (which we find in the preachings of Chaitanya, Tulasidas and Tukaram, etc.) an important section of it led by saints like Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, etc, was directly motivated by the need for the introduction of more equalitarian and non-hierarchical value system in the world-view of Hinduism. Similarly in their exposition of the tradition conscious effort was towards liberalization of the Hindu tradition and its synthesis with Islam."²

A passage from Prof. N. Subrahmanian further explains this issue: "Apart from upsetting of the social balance consequent on conversions, some of the humanitarian ideas preached by the missionaries seemed reasonable to an ever widening circle of educated Hindus, who felt that a reconsideration and a restatement of popular Hindu religious ideas was called for. The literature which the Serampore mission produced had such an effect. The Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samajas were yielding some ground to the new ideas. The Arya Samaj, unwilling to admit some bitter contemporary truths about Hinduism, derived every sanction from ancient texts and interpreted them in their own way to suit their modified views on Hinduism. They try to rationalize but not with eference to western reason, but with reference to ancient Indian rreligious texts reinterpreted by them."³

5. Individualism of the Hindu and the Lack of Social Responsibility

The leading path to the ultimate goal of human beings as the fundamental ideology of Hinduism has been mostly individualistic. The path is through the four Aashrama stages. The third Aashrama, Vaanaprastha, takes place away from home; away from the relatives, and the worldly things. It is in the forest. This is called the renunciation of the world. The fourth stage is the ideal of Sanyaasin, the recluse, in isolation, away from society. The Sanyaasin would meditate and practise asceticism. The Moksha is to be attained by individual efforts. It is also service to God. The family and society are not taken into consideration. This conduct is also styled as selfish. Even the Bhakti cult which includes group-singing, the Bhajan, the temple worship and

2. Yogendra Singh, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, Rawat Publication, '86

3. N. Subrahmanian, op. cit., p. 175.

festivals, is uni-directional — towards a personal deity. The result is a lack of social responsibility. The disprivileged, down-trodden and marginalised, handicapped and orphaned are left to fend for themselves. They are also despised as being undergoing the past Karma pala, the fruit of their bad deeds of earlier births.

Since the last century, the challenge from the west, particularly from Christianity, compelled the Hindu religious leaders to turn towards social service. The Ramakrishna Mission under the inspiring leadership of Vivekananda took upon itself the care of the above-mentioned categories of people. The Karma Yoga of the Bhagavat Geeta was reinterpreted by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gandhiji as service to the nation. In the medieval Tamil Nadu Tirumular, the author of the famous Saivite treatise *Tirumantiram*, gave a new direction to the conception of God in that he underscored that God is within human beings and all activities should be directed towards this God. He advocated that we should nourish the human body. This led to the care and concern for the people and brought in the social dimension. Tiruvalluvar gave top priority to charity and condemned begging. This trend was followed by the Naayanmaars, i.e., the Saivite saints and in the nineteenth century by Ramalinga Swamikal. Such an understanding and vision is attuned to the concept of equality and democratic ideology.

6. Renunciation and its Effects on Society

The quintessence of renunciation is non-attachment, i.e. giving up of desires for children, wealth, sex and other pleasures. This is dubbed as theory of life-negation by the Nobel Laureate Dr. Albert Schweitzer.⁴ The economists and sociologists, both the western and Indian, consider that this practice of renunciation and non-attachment would adversely affect economic, scientific and social advancement which is the important characteristic of the modern age. Albert Schweitzer, instead, appreciated Tiruvalluvar for his emphasis on world-affirmation. Tiruvalluvar gave emphasis to family life and enjoyment of sex. One can see this in the section on Kaama in his work. He talked and warned about the misuse of renunciation.

4. Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, Wilco, (1960). pp. 84-87.

However the non-attachment and renunciation are followed only in theory in contemporary India. Nobody is serious about this nowadays except those who opt for headship of some Math or Aashram. An example is Sri Ramakrishna Mission which is doing some social service. Sivananda Aashram and Chinmaya Mission are also to be cited.

This dichotomy in the Hindu's life may be bridged if one recognizes that service to fellow creatures is service to God. After all, the concept that God is everywhere and in every life is widely approved by the Hindus.

7. Hinduism and Secularism

Very often the Hindu religion is described as a way of life. This is largely true. This is because of the Caste system of the Hindu society. The caste is all-pervading. Caste prescribes the life-style and behaviour of the people. Samskaaras i.e., the religious rites are dictated by the Varna Dharma and Aashrama Dharma. According to the Varna Dharma the Kshatriyas are the political heads, the Kings and chieftains. The Brahmins above them instruct the Kshatriyas on the Dharma. The Kshatriyas are expected to enforce the Varna Dharma. Social, political, economic and religious activities are regulated in this way by Hinduism.

But after the advent of Europeans into India and their impact, the political and economic control of Hinduism was relaxed and finally disappeared. The Independent India, declared itself as a secular state. Politics, economics, education and social life are brought under the secular sphere.

8. Polytheism and Idolatry

One of the challenges, particularly from Islam and Christianity, to Hinduism is in regard to polytheism and idolatry. Perhaps this is due to the bringing in, in the course of its long history, under its umbrella, many of the native and tribal cults of India. They were not perused, sifted, systematised and then absorbed to the core of Hinduism. In the vedic cult there was no idol worship. We observe how idolatry was often condemned by religious leaders. In Tamil Nadu Tirumuular was the first one who proclaimed that God was in the form of love and the temple was the mind of the human being, as He was within and not without. This led to the Yoga and mystic practices in order to see the God

inside oneself. Maanicka Vaachakar (of 9th Cent.) in unambiguous terms talked about God's formlessness.

There is another stream of thought by way of explanation to the image-worship. It states that for the lay men some image is necessary in order to concentrate and meditate because they are unable to conceive of God in the abstract. For the knowledgeable and trained people image-worship is not necessary. This may be taken as deceit.

Image-Worship led to building of large temples, long and pompous festivals and elaborate rites and rituals. These activities take away the hard-earned money of the common people and result in unproductive expenditure. In the context of contemporary urban life where people of all ideologies live together, simple, personal and quiet worship will be conducive to harmonious and integrated living. Tirumuular and Maanickavachakar should be our guides in this regard.

9. Conclusion

So many streams of thought are flowing into the great Hindu religion. Some of the streams are rational, egalitarian, compassionate, socially responsible and simple. Tiruvalluvar, Tirumuular, Tirunavukkaracar, Maanickavaachakar, Basaveswara and Ramalinga Swamigal and the sceptic Siddas were deeply religious and at the same time reinterpreted their religion in order to remove the deadwoods. They are the guiding torches to the contemporary Indians in the perspective of challenges from other great religions, socio-political and liberal ideologies and modern science.

The observation of Percival Spear serves as an apt conclusion: "This is the great question before Hinduism today — to prune and cut or to replant altogether, to change or not to change. Can Western ideals be grafted on the present Hindu system or must there be fresh planting altogether?"⁵

5. Quoted in N. Subrahmanian, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-186.

Buddhism : Reinterpretation of its Tradition The Challenge of Dr. Ambedkar

The author highlights the significance of the re-appropriation and re-interpretation of Buddhism by Ambedkar who was guided by the question "whither re-interpretation". The re-interpretation was meant to challenge the Indian society and to create a new community — a community of equality and righteousness. In Ambedkar's vision a re-interpretation along this line is where we should find also the identity of Indian nation and culture.

Put not your faith in traditions merely because they are old and have come down to us through many generations.

—Kalama Sutta

In this article I intend to examine the manner in which Buddhism has made reinterpretation of its tradition and to illustrate the purpose of that venture. It is the latter, namely, whither reinterpretation of tradition, that ought to pose a constant challenge to religion and society. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar took up such a challenge. He found in Buddhism the right way to awaken human society in India. He plunged into the Buddhist tradition of reinterpretation. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is a significant achievement in Dr. Ambedkar's efforts at the reinterpretation of Buddhism for contemporary Indian society from a subaltern perspective.

Text of Tradition¹

A community has its own beliefs and practices. The creation of a text streamlines its own self-identity. The use of such a text in successive generations helps to create community with a parti-

1. F. X. D'Sa, "Tradition of Texts and Texts of Tradition: A Hermeneutical Reflection on 'Text and Tradition' in *Christian Contribution to Indian Philosophy*, Anand Amaladass (ed.), (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1995) provides a comprehensive notion on the topic.

cular identity. Hence, to begin with, a community creates its text of tradition. Eventually, the text of tradition creates a community. The community becomes a context. After generations of the passing on of the text, under changed and changing circumstances, the effort at reinterpretation is meant to awaken the community to *create a new text that will, hopefully, create a new community.*

Assumption of Reinterpretation

From a sociological perspective the assumptions in the process of reinterpretation of tradition could be twofold, at least, namely, to bring about structural-functional reformation, or basic new communities. The structural-functional reformation assumption suggests that the goal of the process of reinterpretation is to bring about changes in the functions within the given organizational structure to ensure greater efficiency.

The assumption of reinterpretation to bring about basic new communities addresses itself to what is old and traditional and challenges institutions and traditions to make room for the new. In fact, reinterpretation is primarily utilized, in this perspective, to establish a new form of community or institution with new principles and values.

The concern about 'whither reinterpretation' makes us aware of the identity of those for the sake of whom this exercise is undertaken. In the structural functional paradigm money market clientele is in focus and the underlying attitude is reformation for efficiency. In the basic new communities paradigm the target is the people seeking an end of the old, oppressive form of community and desiring to usher in the new. It is time to try to understand the 'whither reinterpretation' in the Buddhist tradition.

Siddhartha Gautama and Reinterpretation

The whole quest of Siddhartha Gautama, revered as the Buddha, the Awakened One, was fundamentally of the nature of reinterpretation.

The single most crucial question that Siddhartha Gautama pursued relentlessly was not about the predicate but the subject of reinterpretation. It was his quest to scrutinize the kind of community that the text of Hindu tradition and its interpretation was imposing on all and sundry. The question confronted by him was to identify those for whom the reinterpretation was intended.

The Social Context of the Buddha

The subaltern perspective for the Buddha was a society held in bondage by the interpreters and reinterpreters of the Hindu tradition. He sought to create a new text. In response to the urgent need of whither reinterpretation, he worked to create a new society. In the new text, the principle of equality of all human beings was clearly laid out. The new community or society was to replace the inequality of its members prevalent in the old dispensation. In the *Vasala Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipata* it is indicated in no uncertain terms that birth is not the determiner of a human being's status in society. That is a reinterpretation indeed of the Hindu tradition where birth is the sure criterion of one's status. So the history of reinterpretation, as far as the Buddha is concerned, has its origin in the social context of Hinduism.

Buddhism manifests a great variety of interpretations of the vision of the Buddha. The variety is seen in the reality of the various sects or schools of Buddhist thought. Such a history continues even to this day. The phenomenon called Neo-Buddhism is a contemporary attempt at reinterpretation by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar and Reinterpretation

He presents the Buddha as a rationalist humanist. This is quite evident from the three criteria put forward by Dr. Ambedkar in *The Buddha And His Dhamma* to determine the authentic words or teachings of the Buddha in the Buddhist scriptures (Tipitaka). The whole work of the Awakened One is interpreted as meant to awaken the society of the subaltern to its own identity² and dignity.

As a consequence of this search for his own identity Dr. Ambedkar was aware that religion is one of its conditions. In 1935 at Yevla in the Nashik District, he declared his resolve to change his religion. At a massive Mahar conference in Bombay held on 30 and 31 May 1936 he spoke of the need for conversion.³

2. D. P. Pattanayak in posing the problem of identity (*Seminar* No. 387, 1991) states that the Hindu tradition created 4000 Jatis, each with a distinct identity, out of the four Varnas. According to his view, a 'twin process of Sanskritization and Prakritization' is at work to change the face of identity. Ambedkar's process seems to be a strong case for Prakritization.

3. The English translation of that speech can be found in Dr. Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar, *Why Go For Conversion?*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademy, 1987.

The process of liberation pursued by Dr. Ambedkar is to be understood as *Prakritization*. It takes the Untouchables back to their indigenous identity and dignity, in this case, through Pali, the Prakrit of the Buddhists in contrast to the discriminatory social system resulting from the process of Sanskritization.

It is not the social context of the Hindus that Ambedkar set out to reform. He has focussed on the *whither reinterpretation*. He is clear that it is 'social freedom for the Untouchables'. The decision to embrace Buddhism was arrived at after considering the manner in which Hinduism and Islam breed social stagnation, and the fact that Christianity does not manifest 'sufficient organised national and social concern'.⁴

The Buddha and His Dhamma⁵

This is a major work of reinterpretation of Buddhism by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It enjoys, in the oral tradition among the converts to Buddhism, the status of being the Bible of the Indian Buddhists. Secondly, even the day of his death is referred to as the day of Dr. Ambedkar's Mahaparinibbana.

While summing up the various opinions about what the Buddha taught, Ambedkar enquires if the Buddha had no 'Social Message'. It is common knowledge that the Buddha taught Ahimsa (non-violence) and peace. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of the Buddha's teaching highlights its social message of justice, love, liberty, equality and fraternity, which, he maintains, has been 'buried by modern authors'.

Ambedkar is conscious of three main concerns that religion must address, if it is to be a true religion. For Dhamma (religion) to be Saddhamma (true religion), he points out, it must pull down all social barriers between man and man. Chaturvarna as a model for an ideal society was indeed regarded as a social barrier by the Buddha for it upheld social inequality. So, for Dhamma to be Saddhamma it must teach that worth and not birth is the measure of man. In the Vasala Sutta, mentioned earlier, the Buddha

4. B. A. M. Paradkar, "The Religious Quest of Ambedkar", in *Ambedkar And The Neo-Buddhist Movement*, T. S. Wilkinson and M. M. Thomas (eds.) (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1972). p. 61.

5. It was first published in 1957, and is now available as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bombay: The Education Department, The Government of Maharashtra, 1992.

teaches that one is not high (Brahmin) or low (Vasala) by birth. By one's own actions does one become high or low. Finally, for Dhamma to be Saddhamma it must promote equality in society. Ambedkar concludes his hermeneutics of Dhamma and Saddhamma with the affirmation that the Buddha argued that a religion which does not preach equality is not worth and that the Buddha's religion 'which promotes the happiness of others simultaneously with the happiness of oneself and tolerates no oppression' is better than others. Thus, Ambedkar's hermeneutics from a sub-altern perspective incorporated the vital role of true religion to bring about justice, love, liberty, equality and fraternity.

Dalits and Ambedkar

Inspired by the Black Panther Movement for social and racial justice and equality in the United States of America, Dalit youth of Maharashtra began a radical revolutionary Dalit Panthers Movement in 1972. By then Ambedkar was seen as the champion of the Mahars, one of the Untouchable groups to which he belonged by birth. There were other groups that were Untouchables and who had not embraced Buddhism. While Ambedkar had tried to work out his radical social reform with a Buddhist method, without getting the bloody revolutionary Marxist Communist one, the Dalit Panthers were more strident.

The Dalit Panthers stated the identity of a Dalit in their Manifesto as:

Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.⁶

The Dalit awakening to a new political consciousness says it all. Unity of the Dalits is essential to speak in one voice of the hermeneutics of the marginalized nearly half a century after the Independence of India. Certainly the new identity as proposed in the Manifesto goes beyond the identity given to

6. For the complete text of the Dalit Panthers Manifesto, Bombay, 1973, see Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991), pp. 232–239. A useful resource for understanding the identity of the Dalits is James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits; Dalit Issues In Today's Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994). A valuable article in it is J. Massey, "Historical Roots", pp. 3–55.

the Dalit by embracing Buddhism. It broadens its perspective to identify the Dalits as those suffering the social, economic, political and religious exploitation, and includes the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and women.

Conclusion

Ambedkar was seized by the paramount importance of 'whither reinterpretation'. He did not claim any originality to it, but a conscious appropriation of the heritage of the Buddha awakened to the suffering of the marginalized human beings. He reinterpreted the text of the Buddhist tradition to challenge Indian society to create a new community, the Kingdom of Righteousness on earth. He hoped that reappropriation of such a tradition would give to India a new identity as a community culture and country.

De Nobili College
Pune

Rosario Rocha

Book Reviews

Benedict Vadakkekara, *ORIGIN OF INDIA'S ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CRITIQUE*, Delhi: Media House, 1995. pp. xii + 511. Price Rs. 325.00; US \$ 30.00.

Here is a book the price of which may look prohibitive to the Indian reader. But the matter stuffed into it is so rich, the documents and writings surveyed so large that its worth is much higher than the price. The book with its three long chapters, and a rather long introduction and a conclusion and copious foot notes — perhaps more than half of the book is devoted to elaborate footnotes and references — forms a mine of information. The sources and bibliography referred to and quoted run into full 27 pages, 222 items. Besides there are several rare illustrations. The author has analysed or at least referred to every available material on the subject he treats. This is indeed a very solid, well-documented scientific study of the subject. The book may not be easy reading, intended as it is for experts for study and investigation.

The problem with which the author is concerned is the Origin of India's St Thomas Christians. The starting point or the 'spring board' for the investigation is "the concrete reality of the tradition of India's St Thomas Christians that their community derives its origin from the preaching of the Apostle Thomas". Every student of history has to cope with traditions of communities and peoples. Tradition becomes all-important when it is the only source. Ancient Indian history is very much the fruit of the interpretation of the traditions. It is also the case of early Christianity in India. The historian has the task of discerning the elements of truth in a particular tradition. He should achieve this through a critical analysis of the various aspects of the tradition and yield a history which is coherent and verifiable,

In the book, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I (Bangalore 1984) this reviewer has made an assessment of the different sources of the St. Thomas tradition — western tradition, Indian tradition, the St Thomas Christian community, the tomb

of Mylapore — and concluded that the combination of the various traditions provides an argument of convergence reasonable enough to arrive at a certitude that the origin of Christianity in India goes back to the preaching of St Thomas the Apostle in India. The author of the book under review, though takes into consideration various sources of the tradition, appears to concentrate on what I have called 'Indian tradition', the tradition of India's St Thomas Christians. It is from the force of this tradition that he works out his conclusions.

Chapter one of the book deals with the question who the St Thomas Christians are. It examines the constituent elements of their identity, the various names by which their tradition finds expression, the groups into which the community has been divided in the course of history. Though they exist today in various ecclesial communions they all have the feeling of belonging to one and the same family clan and look upto St Thomas the Apostle as their common founder and spiritual father. This consciousness of theirs is the pre-eminent mark of their identity.

There is agreement among historians about the existence of the tradition of India's St Thomas Christians and also about its antiquity. But the interpretations of the traditions vary. Chapter two arrays the various shades of these interpretations. They are reduced to two general opposite positions: 1) the origin of India's Christians of St Thomas *is* from Apostle Thomas; 2) their origin *is not* from him. The arguments of the two groups of writers holding these opposite views are presented not in a chronological but a logical order. Though in the interpretations of the traditions they take opposite views, there is much on which they agree.

Chapter three is the crucial section of the book. In it the author makes his critique of the representative views of each of the two opposing groups. It is evident that neither of the groups denies the "physical possibility" of St Thomas having come to India in the first century and preached the gospel here. What prevents the second group of historians to go further is the lack of contemporary written documents. Now the concern of the author is how to convert this "physical possibility" into a "historical reality". For this he analyses the

internal structure of the community. The different elements of the community structure analysed are: the institution of arch-deacon, local and general assemblies, the metropolitan and local clergy. The relation of the St Thomas Christians to the East Syrian and other Churches, their relation to other communities of India are also assessed. This analysis cum assessment leads the author to the following conclusions: The tradition of the community is intimately connected with the structures and relations and is an undetachable part of the unique existence and identity shared neither by other churches nor by other communities.

The St Thomas tradition is undetachably inherent to the internal structures of the St Thomas Christians and to their life as a community. It is consistent, constant and unanimous and does not exist in the abstract but is the very constituting element of the community, with a force as powerful as a caste. It was the very principle and the binding strength that kept the community one and united. It provided an effective and efficient inner structure for the community.

When the origin of St Thomas Christians is investigated in this light the author sees the dividing line between the "physical possibility" and the "historical actuality" vanishing. The community's concrete existence on the basis of its tradition, and its history that has been conditioned, moulded and steered by the same tradition, appear historical actualization of the "physical possibility". If the apostolate of St Thomas is judged as unhistorical "there is the impelling exigency to account for the tradition". If St Thomas is ruled out of any connection with the communities of St Thomas Christians no other explanation fits in with what is known of their previous history.

Here is a new challenging book on the origin of Christianity in India. One has to wait and see how historians react to this challenge. Wish the book all success. Experts will find it a great mine into which they must delve.

Rajagiri,
Kalamassery

A. M. Mundadan

1. Tissa Balasuriya OMI, *MARY AND HUMAN LIBERATION*, Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1994 pp. vii, 210 Rs. 100. \$ 8

The book is a reprint of *Logos*, volume 29 (1990) nos. 1 & 2. In the context of the universal popular devotion to Mary, the author tries to reflect on the meaning of Mary especially for our times, in order to understand "what sort of a life Mary and her companions might have lived in the tumultuous times of repression of persons, social injustice, a burdensome religion, foreign occupation and a people's rebellion against these" (p. iv). After two chapters devoted to Catholic devotion and traditional theology regarding Mary, the author proposes a rethinking of Marian theology dealing with Mary as an adult woman. Here Mary's personality is discussed not in terms of her personal privileges like the immaculate conception and virginity but taking into account her role in the work of Jesus for social liberation.

Mary knew the approach of the early Church to be a sort of "socialistic" and "communistic" way of life and actively participated in it. The author criticizes the contemporary feminist trend of figuring Mary as filling the role of the feminine in God, in a patriarchal religion. "This dichotomizing of the "masculine" and "feminine" and attributing the male qualities to God and the "feminine" to Mary is bad for both the divinity and Mary." He presents a Mariology in which the human Mary is seen as participating in the mission of Jesus which is open to all human kind. The accent is on women's struggle for full humanity. According to him Marian spirituality should be deeply and desperately concerned with the present situation in the world.

Since the material regarding Mary is very limited in Revelation, as the author himself admits, a good part of the book is supplied by imagination. It is a good meditation on the social doctrine of the Church with focus on Jesus and with Mary as his close helper.

2. David J. Hassel, S. J. *RADICAL PRAYER, CREATING A WELCOME FOR GOD, OURSELVES OTHER PEOPLE AND THE WORLD*, reprint: Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1995.

This is a book the chapters of which originally appeared in the *Review for Religious*. According to Father Hassel, "basically

prayer is a deep benevolent attitude toward God, his people, and his world. It is expressed in gratitude, in intimate companionship with Christ, in trusting reverence, in hunger to do God's will, in joyful confidence amidst suffering, and in gracious welcome to all events and persons. Prayer embraces several levels of awareness, starting with a sensuous superficial level and going through the physical vital, and the psychological psychic, and the deepest level of quiet beneath all turbulence. The book is a detailed diagnosis of different types of prayer.

3. Wilkie Au, S. J., *BY WAY OF THE HEART, TOWARD A HOLISTIC CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY*, Bombay: Saint Paul Publications, 1993, pp. x; 219. Rs. 70.

The book is a manual of spirituality presenting holistic integration of psychology. According to the author to go to God by way of the heart is both graceful and human. Heart is taken as the traditional image for a way of perceiving, feeling, and loving that engages the total person. As far as spirituality is concerned there is a prejudice against psychology, and lay people are not supposed to be spiritual. A spirituality based on love which is the basis of the Gospel is taken as the appropriate answer to these two prejudices. The demanding challenges of the modern world affect lay Christians. The world of "future shock" is affecting the religious as well. What is needed is a concern for wholeness, a desire for integration, an attempt to understand the connections among the various aspects that affect the reality of human life. Holistic spiritual growth must include the ongoing struggle for integration and wholeness.

The compelling quality of Jesus' message was its simplicity going right to the heart of the matter. He reduced the whole Law and the Prophets to the twofold command of love. From that twofold love are derived five distinct loves, love of God, neighbourly love, communal love, friendship and self-love. Though they are distinct they interact and affect each other. Jesus not only teaches us to practice his teaching, but also warns that our very hearing of his word must be done with care. He emphasizes the importance of the human effort to achieve a holistic orientation of our life. In the spiritual transformation into Christ, effort is what counts, not unremitting success. Our experiences function as nourishment for the spiritual growth. The whole thrust of the book is that loving,

including supernatural loving, is an art. Holistic practice develops habits of the heart.

John B. Chethimattam

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